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WELCOME



Welcome to the new Home Farmer and the New Year. Let me wish everyone a great 2015, and great success with all your projects, whether home farming or other. Last year was a better year for gardeners, with reasonable weather, and we're keeping our fingers crossed for 2015.

Each New Year brings both good and bad, and sadly the prospects for 2015 (or later) were brought down to earth with the news that Royal Mail is reconsidering its policy of delivering to all parts of the UK for a single fixed cost. We have covered rural post offices in Home Farmer, but it is ironic that as concerns now seem to have abated, a new one arises. Many Home Farmer readers live in rural areas that will be affected by this change, which we were promised would not happen at the time of the privatisation. We know for a fact that the change would penalise a significant number of people, and a significant number of smaller companies who mail out to people other than those living in larger towns and cities. It was always clear that new entrants into the mail delivery sector would look to take on only the best and most profitable routes, and would then offer the best prices to potential customers on these routes, leaving Royal Mail with the rest.

Better news this month comes in the form of the Home Farmer app, which will enable readers to access Home Farmer through yet another avenue – the App Store and the Android media for tablets and smartphones. Visit **www.homefarmer.co.uk/app** to investigate our new app. Soon the only way you *won't* be able to access us is via stone tablet, but we are working on it – although the postage costs could be a killer!

NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE

Due to the Christmas break, your Home Farmer will be slightly later than usual. Subscription copies will be posted on Friday 2nd January, whilst the magazine will be in the shops on Saturday 3rd January. Happy holidays everybody.

PAUL MELNYCZUK
Editor

PHOTO CREDIT: Our thanks to Joneve Murphy for allowing us to use her photograph of Caroline Ward, one of the participants on the FarmStart programme, on the front cover. You can follow Joneve Murphy's journey as she visits sustainable farms around the world on her blog: www.farmerseekingroots.com.

#hello

DAVE HAMILTON



Dave has written two books about eco-living and food growing: *The Self-sufficient-ish Bible* and *Grow Your Food for Free*. He's working on a third book about ruins. He lives in Somerset, teaches foraging and shares the parenting of his son Douglas.

LIZZIEB



When not busy in the kitchen creating her fabulous recipes for Home Farmer, LizzieB is running her online vintage fabric shop from her home in Malvern, Worcestershire. If you love crafting, beads and all things vintage, head over to **www.thevintagefabricshop.com**

MARIE-CLAIRE KIDD



On her twitter feed, Marie-Claire Kidd describes herself as a freelance journalist on co-operatives, food, farming and environment; cyclist; lover of dogs; gardener; do-gooder; rebel; and friend from t'Pennines.

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"IT'S BEST TO GET A LITTLE EXPERIENCE UNDER YOUR BELT FIRST, THEN GO ON TO DO YOUR EXPERIMENTING"

HOME FARMER IN THE KITCHEN MAKING SAUSAGES

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CALL FOR ACTION ON UNHEALTHY EATING



IN A PUSH to tackle diet-related ill health, an open letter has been sent to the heads of the World Health Organization and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations by leading health campaigners and consumer advocates. They are calling for greater action to protect and promote healthy eating, together with the introduction of a mechanism along the lines of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, which has proved successful in reducing the use of tobacco. The letter states that:

"The governance of food production and distribution cannot be left to economic interests alone" and urges governments to impose limits on saturated fats, added sugar and sodium in food and to reduce the exposure of children to the marketing of such products. It also proposes regulatory action to achieve these goals and fiscal measures to discourage the consumption of unhealthy foods, together with a call for all trade and investment policies to be assessed on the basis of their potential health benefits. Co-authors of the letter include the UK Health Forum, Consumers International, the World Obesity Federation, with the active support of many individuals and organisations in the field of health and nutrition. Referring to the increases in obesity, diabetes, heart disease and cancer in all regions of the world, but most rapidly in developing countries, Director General of Consumers International, Amanda Long, said: "The policy actions that governments take now will determine whether we can turn the tide on this health crisis. A binding Global Convention offers the best hope of protecting and promoting the health of all consumers."

ENCOURAGE YOUNG FARMERS

A DESIRE TO encourage younger people into farming has brought about special support measures and incentives for younger farmers in the Common Agricultural Policy,



and has caused Farming Minister, George Eustice, to suggest that young people should not have to inherit a farm to enter into the industry. At the Three Counties Farming Conference he said the sector needed new blood, and called for entrants into the industry to be helped in achieving their aims. He described the price of land, which has tripled in the last ten years, as the biggest barrier and suggested that we need to identify new routes into the industry. However, an earlier initiative to tackle the problem by former minister, David Heath, under the title The Future of Farming Group, concluded that in addition to high prices, agriculture also presented something of a 'closed shop' to prospective new entrants, specifically those without an agricultural background. Indeed this was described as being a greater disincentive than land prices to a new generation of farmers, excluding fresh ideas, enthusiasm and proven business skills from contributing to an important industry. As was pointed out by CLA President, Henry Robinson, at the conference, a quarter of UK farmers are now over 65 years of age. Time is running out if we are to keep our agriculture vibrant and dynamic.

LANDWORKERS' ALLIANCE AGM

OVER SIXTY FARMERS and growers gathered in Manchester in November for the third AGM of the Landworkers' Alliance. It was an action-packed two days of socialising and strategy, with speakers and participants discussing topics ranging from food sovereignty to innovations in urban–rural supply chains, and the threat that free-trade agreements like TTIP and CETA pose for UK farmers and growers. Visit http://landworkersalliance.org.uk/food-sovereignty-football/ to find out more and to watch a choreographed football match between Family Farmers United and Agribusiness FC outside Parliament on World Food Day.



NEWS IN BRIEF

RECYCLING

According to official statistics, recycling rates in England have apparently stalled, with a rise of just 0.1% on the previous year's figure of 44.2%.

GM CROPS

According to a study published in risk assessment journal, *Environment International*, almost all GM crops approved worldwide received that approval in spite of a complete absence of published, peer-reviewed research supporting their safety.

ELECTRICITY

The World Wildlife Fund's Scottish arm has published findings using WeatherEnergy data, which reveal that during October wind turbines generated sufficient electricity to power over 3 million homes – 126% of the electricity needs for Scottish households.

RISE OF THE URBAN FARM



AN AREA ROUGHLY the size of the European Union is apparently now given over to urban food production, according to research by the International Water Management Institute. This is far greater than previous estimates and amounts to some 456 million hectares. The figure is also increasing, in line with general movements of population from the country to urban areas. The report, the first to assess the levels of urban agriculture worldwide, describes most urban agriculture as being on the edges of conurbations, although 67 million acres is actually sited in the centres of towns and cities. It also considered differences in practices, and found that much urban agriculture actually produced a more nutritious harvest than rural agriculture, which was often dominated by calorie-rich cereals, and cropping intensity was also higher in urban areas. On a downside, however, issues such as pollution in the water supply in urban areas was of considerable concern, with urban farmers in Accra, Ghana, apparently now recycling more domestic waste water than the local water treatment plants. In spite of this, the researchers concluded that in addition to contributing to food security, urban farming puts marginal land into productive use, aids local economies, assists in flood control and strengthens urban biodiversity.

Ironically, urban farming in developing countries is often viewed as a negative factor which stands in the way of modernisation, while in wealthy countries it is viewed as a way of reducing our carbon footprint and 'greening' our more polluted urban areas. The researchers believe that a better understanding of the extent and characteristics of urban crop production will support better decisions on urban policy and planning, specifically with regard to issues such as irrigation with polluted water and potential conflicts as to how limited supplies should best be used. Visit http://iopscience.iop.org/1748-9326/9/11/114002/article to read more of the researchers' report.



NATIONAL POLLINATOR STRATEGY

We referred briefly to this strategy when welcoming Liz Truss to the position of Environment Secretary, but here are a few more facts. The initiative aims to turn 800,000 hectares of English land into 'wild flower rich' areas that will attract the country's 1,500 species of insects, such as bees, butterflies and beetles, and help sustain their dwindling populations. The project is a ten-year initiative designed to halt the 97 per cent decline in such habitats since the 1930s, and is being done in partnership with Network Rail, the National Trust and the Highways Agency, who will sow seeds on motorway verges and railway embankments, leaving nature to do the rest. Funding for farmers and landowners will be available from Defra. The initiative has been given a cautious welcome by environmental groups, but bee biologist, Professor Dave Goulson of Sussex University, and Peter Melchett of the Soil Association have both argued that the measure will only succeed if accompanied by coordinated action on pesticides, weedkillers and neonicotinoid seed dressings. You can view the National Pollinator Strategy document by keying 'National Pollinator Strategy document' into your search engine. Information is also available from charities The Wildlife Trust, Buglife, the Bumblebee Conservation Trust, and The British Beekeepers' Association.

IT'S SHOW TIME!

THE EDIBLE GARDEN Show and Good Life Live will take place at Alexandra Palace in London on 20th–22nd March 2015, and they have already put together a broad package of events, demonstrations, talks and stands to serve all the needs of the nation's home farmers. This year the event is introducing exciting new features and attractions to its popular 'plot to plate' format, and broadening the scope of the occasion with the addition of Good Life Live, which extends the concept to include country pursuits, home comforts and smallholding with new Chicken Coop, Village Green, Family Zone and Make It features. The show will feature familiar experts, including botanist James Wong, forager Mark Lloyd and chef Rachel Green, and offers visitors a unique opportunity to talk face to face with them as they wander round in the relaxed environment of the event.

Sadly missed at last year's event was the livestock section from earlier events at Stoneleigh, but this year's event will feature award-winning Surrey Docks Farm, which will be bringing along a selection of its farm animals, including sheep, goats, chickens, ducks, and possibly even a miniature Shetland pony. Event Director, Geraldine Reeve, commented: "As event organisers it's important that we support the growing and farming communities in London wherever we can. We've experienced first-hand the fantastic work of Surrey Docks Farm and we're excited about working with them before and during the show. Not only will visitors be able to experience the farm for themselves, they will also have the opportunity to make a donation to the farm when they purchase their tickets from our online box office." And also new for 2015, under 16s will be able to visit the show free of charge.

For further announcements and to find out more visit the website: www.theediblegardenshow.co.uk.



Perry the goat with farm apprentice Tom Goody.

GLOBAL AGREEMENTS TO PROTECT MIGRATORY BIRDS



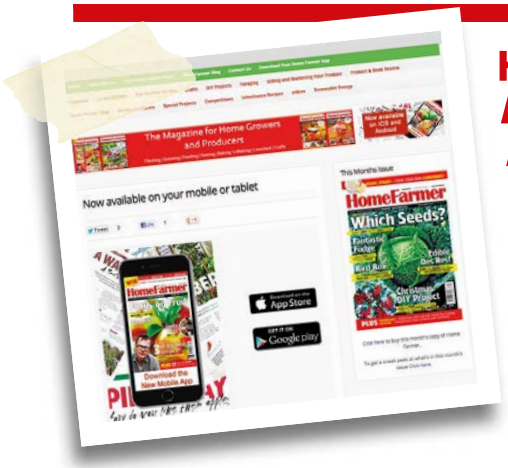
THE RSPB HAS welcomed two historic global agreements including a set of guidelines to tackle the causes of poisoning and a groundbreaking action plan to save more than 400 bird species. The Resolution Preventing Poisoning of Migratory Birds supports the guidelines to prevent the risk of poisoning, encourages parties to reduce and minimise poisoning of migratory birds, including recommending a ban on veterinary diclofenac, the phasing out of all lead ammunition and action on rodenticides, insecticides and poison baits – the five most significant poisoning risks to migratory birds. Martin Harper, RSPB Director of Conservation, paid tribute to the active role of the UK government in achieving this agreement, but described it as just the first step.

The second agreement, The Landbird Action Plan, sets out ways to improve the conservation status of more than 400 different species of bird that use the African–Eurasian flyway, identifying the need for landscape-scale protection and recognising how everybody doing their bit can make a real difference. Martin Harper expressed delight that landbirds including turtle doves, cuckoos, nightjars and vultures would now be offered the same protection as migratory waterbirds, from breeding grounds in the UK to wintering areas in West Africa. He described it as "a good day for conservation".

THE ENGLISH WINTER FAIR

THE ENGLISH WINTER Fair, formerly the National Primestock Show, was held at Bingley Hall in Stafford on 15th/16th November. The event is designed to celebrate the role of agriculture in food production and brings together all the best aspects of husbandry, new innovation and food manufacture, together with a wide range of related crafts. It's an opportunity to see some of the nation's finest livestock close up. Visit www.staffscountyshowground.co.uk/english-winter-fair/ to see more about the event, together with photos and results.





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AND THE WINNER IS...

The winner of our Ferryman polytunnel is I. Waring from Northants. Congratulations, and a big thank-you to the great team at Ferryman Polytunnels for donating the prize.



Photo © Marcin Floryan.

MAJOR OAK

England's tree of the year in a competition arranged by the Woodland Trust is a 1,000-year-old oak tree in Sherwood Forest. The tree has concealed hollows which are said to have served as a hideaway for the forest's most famous residents – Robin Hood and his Merry Men. The secret of the tree's longevity is apparently its slow and steady growth in very poor acidic soil, combined with its solitary position, which has meant little competition when it comes to sourcing nutrients. According to Izi Banton, Site Manager of Sherwood Forest Country Park, the biggest problem for Major Oak in recent times has been kindness, with, at various stages, the tree being filled with concrete to support it, having metal chains attached to its branches and having its limbs clad with lead and then fibreglass.

Major Oak apparently weighs around 23 tons, with a girth of 10 metres and a spread of 28 metres. It is estimated to be between 800 and 1,000 years old, and is just one of 997 ancient oaks within Sherwood Forest Country Park. Given its age and the uncertainty surrounding Robin Hood, it is unlikely that every story told about it is true, but that doesn't detract in any way from the tree's magnificence. It will join Scotland's winning tree, Lady's Tree, a Scots pine that has been home to Lady the osprey, and Wales' winning tree, the Lonely Tree of Llanfyllin, another Scots pine blown down in a gale in February, to compete in the European tree of the year contest, which takes place in February next year.

POTATO DAYS



HERE IS JUST a small selection of the potato and seed swop days being held in the UK in January. There will be many more, and it's worth checking with your local allotment society for information on what's happening near you. Of course, many events have more than just potatoes to sell and seeds to swop, and a comprehensive list covering events in January–March is at: **www.homefarmer.co.uk/potato-days-2015**. We will print February's list in the next issue.

PLEASE NOTE

We have provided all the information available at the time of going to press. Some organisers haven't posted specific information regarding their event, or details of admission fee (if applicable).

DIARY DATES

SATURDAY 10TH JANUARY

BRIDPORT POTATO DAY

Bridport United Church,
East Street, Bridport, DT6 3LY
10.00am–2.00pm
Refreshments
Admission: Free

SUNDAY 11TH JANUARY

BRISTOL POTATO DAY AND SEED FAIR

Southville Centre, Beauley Road, Southville, Bristol, BS3 1QG
10.00am–2.00pm
Refreshments. Free talks
Admission: Adults £1.00. Children Free

SATURDAY 17TH JANUARY

CAMBRIDGE POTATO AND SEED SWOP DAY

Commemoration Hall, 39 High Street, Huntingdon, PE29 3AQ
11.00am–3.00pm
New this year: onion sets and shallots
Refreshments. Craft stands. Children's activities
Admission: Free

SWINDON POTATO DAY

Gorse Hill Community Centre, Chapel Street, Swindon, SN2 8DA
10.30am–2.00pm
Refreshments
Admission: Free

SUNDAY 18TH JANUARY

PEWSEY POTATO DAY

Bouverie Hall, North Street, Pewsey, SN9 5EQ
10.00am–2.00pm
Admission: £1.00 (includes refreshments)

RUSLAND POTATO DAY

Greenodd Village Hall, Ulverston, Cumbria, LA12 7QZ
10.00am–3.00pm

SATURDAY 24TH JANUARY

MARSHFIELD POTATO DAY

Marshfield Community Centre, The Hayfield, Marshfield, SN14 8PG
10.00am–2.00pm
Refreshments
Admission: 50p.

SUNDAY 25TH JANUARY

BLANDFORD POTATO DAY

Pimperne Village Hall, Pimperne, Nr. Blandford, DT11 8UZ
10.00am–2.00pm

MACCLESFIELD POTATO AND SEED SWOP DAY

Macclesfield Town Hall, Market Place, Macclesfield, SK10 1EA
10.00am–3.30pm
Including onion sets, shallots, garlic, fruit bushes and trees
www.maccinfo.com/food4macc/MacclesfieldPotatoDay.html

SATURDAY 31ST JANUARY

SKELMERSDALE POTATO DAY

Concourse Shopping Centre, Skelmersdale, WN8 6LN
10.00am–3.00pm

URCHFONT POTATO DAY

The Village Hall, Urchfont, Nr. Devizes, SN10 4QT
10.00am–1.00pm
Admission: £1.00 (includes first tea/coffee & biscuit)

SATURDAY 31ST JANUARY & SUNDAY 1ST FEBRUARY

HAMPSHIRE POTATO DAYS

Testbourne Community Centre, Micheldever Road, Whitchurch, RG28 7JF
10.00am–3.00pm
Refreshments. Talks and advice. Plant stalls
Admission: Adults £2.00. Accompanied children Free









ON THE PLOT

Joyful January

There is **always something** to do in the **garden**, even in January, writes **John Harrison**. Here are a few ideas to **keep** you **busy** and help **lose** those extra **Xmas pounds** as you **limber up** for the **new season**

It's traditional to start the New Year with resolutions, few of which usually last beyond January, if they even make it beyond the first week. I have a feeling that's because most resolutions are negative and involve giving up something you love like chocolate or chips. So, here's a new idea for you – why not try a positive resolution this year? Resolve to get more time out on the plot – not only will your veggies benefit, but so will your health.

And here I don't just mean your physical health. We all have times of stress in our lives, not least when the bills begin to come in after Christmas. There have been times when I've gone out to the plot with the weight of the entire world on my shoulders. Then, after an hour or two of pottering about, and a brief respite with a mug of soup from the flask whilst taking in the beauty of a crisp winter's day, that weight simply evaporates. It doesn't really solve your problems, but it usually puts them into perspective.

January can be a tricky gardening month – if we're under a foot of snow, then it's obvious that there's not much you can be doing, but if the weather is fine and the sky is blue, there's a temptation to jump in and start sowing, only to see the weather suddenly turn foul in February, setting you back to square one again.

There's really nothing I would suggest you sow or plant outside at this time, but there are a few things you can start off under glass or on a south-facing windowsill. For example, tomatoes and aubergines, both members of the same family, can be sown in January, and they usually do best in a heated propagator to get them going.

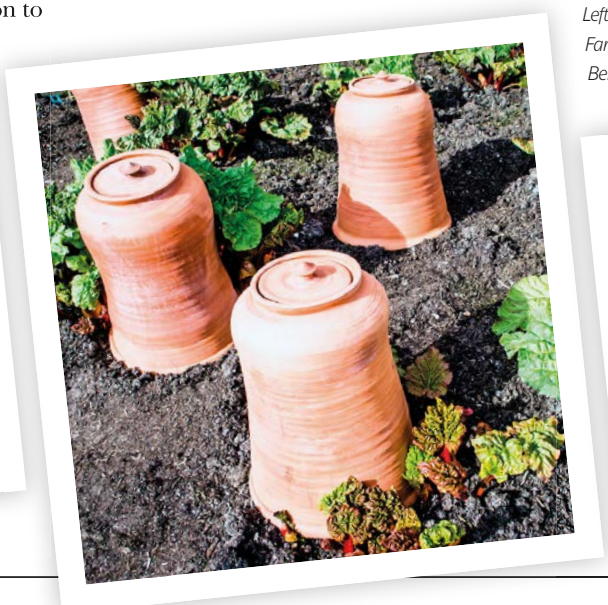
The biggest problem at this time of year is actually the available levels of light. Covering cardboard with aluminium foil and standing it to the north side of the seed tray will reflect extra light and help prevent leggy, drawn seedlings without the extra expense of special horticultural lights.

Onions can be sown in January, but unlike tomatoes and aubergines, which like it to be about 20°C, you want the temperature around or slightly below 15°C for onions. And watch out on any sunny days – it may be cold outside, but the temperature can seriously shoot up in the greenhouse or cold frame.

If the weather is good, there are *always* jobs you can find to do. Did the greenhouse get a good clean out at the end of last year? Maybe it's the ideal opportunity to put a coat of preservative on the shed or repair that hole in the fence?

One thing you might like to try is forcing rhubarb. What you want to do is to push the plant into growth by warming it up whilst growing it in the dark so that you end up with sweeter and more tender stems. The old method was to use special rhubarb-forcing pots, which were placed over the dormant crowns with straw and manure, which was then heaped around and over to heat up the interior. It's an easier job nowadays in that you can just upend a black plastic dustbin over the crown and weigh it down with a few bricks on top to stop it blowing away. The heat from the sun will then be absorbed by the bin and warm up the rhubarb, giving you an early crop. This has to be paid for though, as we're effectively using the capital the plant has built up in the crown to produce the crop, and it is







Left: Traditional terracotta rhubarb-forcing pots.
Far left: Forced rhubarb is always sweet, tender and early!
Below: A very young tomato seedling.



"IF YOU'VE GOT PARSNIPS, OVERWINTERING CARROTS OR OTHER ROOT CROPS IN THE GROUND, NOW IS A GOOD TIME TO GET THEM DUG OUT"

Top tip!

If the weather's fine in January, don't jump in and start sowing, as the weather can suddenly turn foul in February and set you back to square one.



Above: By splitting your crowns you can double the size of your rhubarb patch.

going to take a good two or three years to build back up.

Another job you can do is to rejuvenate an old rhubarb patch. Dig up the old crowns and split them top to bottom with a spade into two pieces, or four with an older plant. Ideally, you should move them to another spot, but, assuming you've no disease problems, you can replant them 1m apart in the same area. Dig over the soil well, as deep as you can, and incorporate as much rotted manure and compost as possible, then fork in 1kg of bonemeal per square metre (or 2lb per square yard, in real money). If you don't have manure and/or compost available you can use a slow-release fertiliser for bushes at twice the recommended rate.

Plant the crowns with the buds just at the surface, and don't forget to give them a feed every month with a high-nitrogen fertiliser whilst they're producing in the season so they can build up their strength quickly. You'll be amazed at the results. A friend gave me some old crowns, which I treated as above, and at the end of the season he didn't believe they were the same ones!

It's also not too late to start a traditional bean trench for your runner beans. I've never bothered with one when growing on heavy, moisture-retaining soils, but on light soils in the dry South and East, I'd say they were a must

"THE BIGGEST PROBLEM AT THIS TIME OF YEAR IS ACTUALLY THE AVAILABLE LEVELS OF LIGHT"





Left: Give your runner beans the best start by creating a bean trench if your soil is light.



Leeks in January.

for real success. Dig the trench down to about 45cm deep or to the subsoil – whichever comes first – and place the soil to the side. Then line the trench with three or four layers of newspaper and fill with compostable garden and kitchen waste to about 30cm – but with no vermin-attracting meat or fish waste, or perennial weeds like dandelions, docks or bindweed. Finally, cover with the removed soil as you fill up along the trench. By late April or May the rounded top should have sunk down to near level and you can then sow or plant your beans in the knowledge that they'll have plenty of moisture and nutrients for good growth.

If you've got parsnips, overwintering carrots or other root crops in the ground, now is a good time to get them dug out. They will stay quite happily in the ground, but if there's a real cold snap and the ground freezes, you could well find yourself unable to harvest.

Any leeks left standing will be fine, whatever the weather, but you may find them hard to get out of frozen ground, or taking up ground you want to dig or manure. The answer is to pull them and then draw a shallow trench. Place the leek roots in the trench, side by side, and cover with a little soil. They'll keep fresh and easy to harvest whatever the weather throws at you.

Resolution

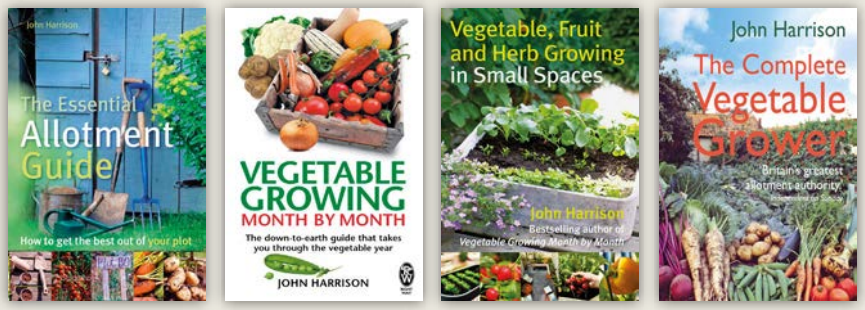
Resolve to get more time out on the plot – not only will your veggies benefit, but so will your health.

John Harrison

SPECIAL OFFER



John Harrison has received numerous awards and accolades, including becoming a fellow of the prestigious National Vegetable Society, and has been described by *The Independent on Sunday* as "Britain's greatest allotment authority". Over the years his books have helped many growers to maximise their crops while helping to keep gardening an enjoyable pastime, and all of them are available together with a generous offer from Suttons of **£10 worth of seeds** with each paperback, and **£15 worth of seeds** with the hardback *The Complete Vegetable Grower.*



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HEDGING *your bets...*

As a **wildling** from the far north of Scotland, **Mike Clark** understands the **practical** role of **hedging**. Here is his **guide** to the very best **windbreak** varieties

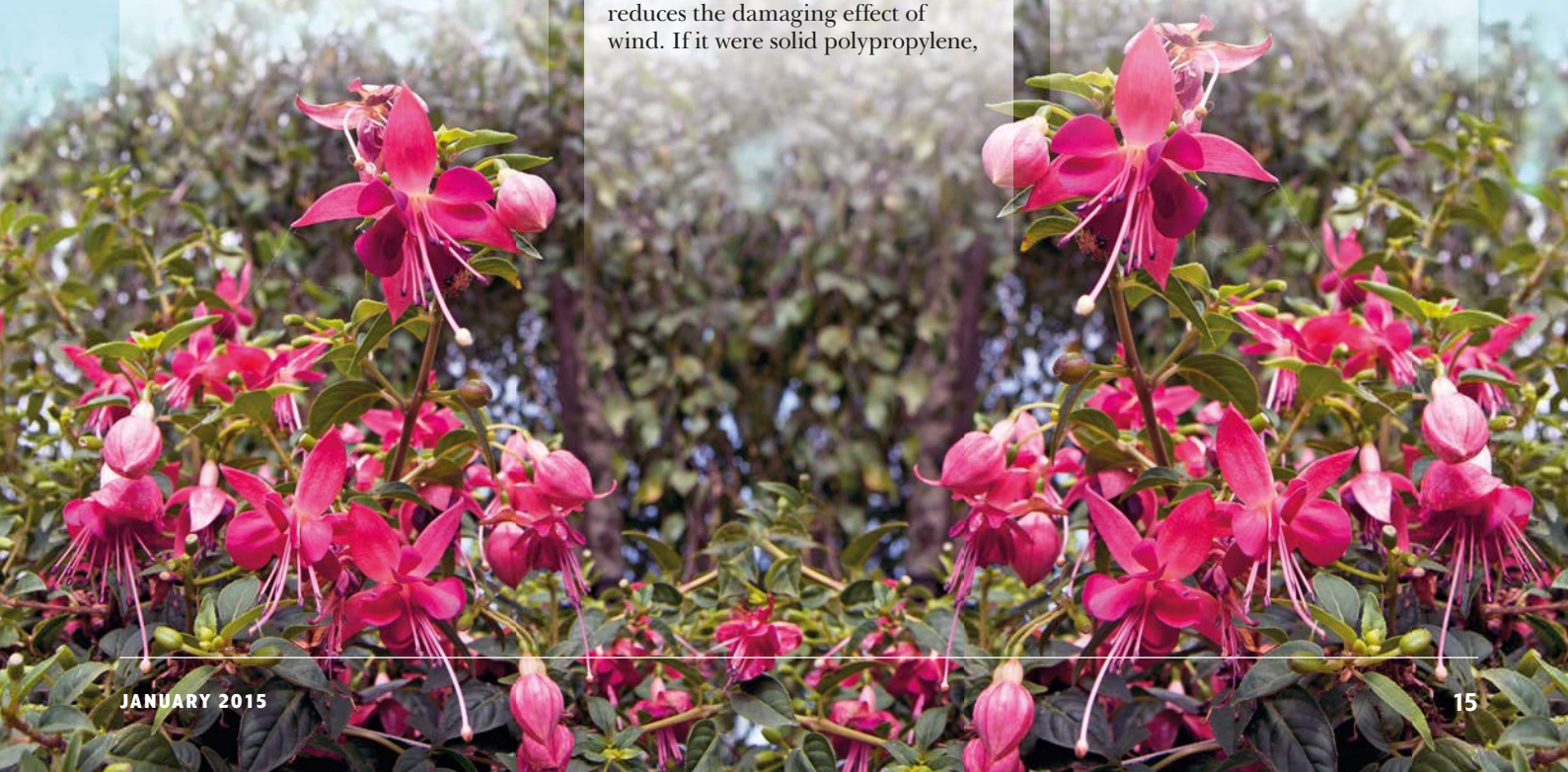
Hedges have many functions: they define our boundaries; they give us privacy; they can, if the plants are chosen carefully, be both a haven and a feast for wildlife; and they can be decorative, ornamental and pleasing to the eye.

For most smallholders and gardeners, however, the primary function of a hedge is to provide shelter. Our crops are all susceptible to wind damage, and this becomes a bigger problem at higher altitudes or in coastal locations. So, as someone who lives and gardens on the exposed north coast of Scotland, I reckon some of my hedging experience is certainly worth sharing. Consequently, in the words that follow I will offer some advice on the hedging plants best suited for sheltering your precious vegetables.

Firstly, though, I must anticipate one initial question; hands up if you just asked, "Why not build a wall or erect a fence?" Well, certainly, walls and fences can be erected to a desired height in perhaps a few days, whereas a typical hedge will take several years to reach the height you require. But the best way to break wind is to filter it. *(You, there – stop it – this is not a Carry On film!).* Walls block wind, and in doing so they create a turbulence which whirls over the wall and down, and can do considerable damage to the very same plants you are trying to protect. A close-boarded or hit-and-miss fence will also produce the same effect.

A hedge actually slows the wind down, filtering it and reducing the speed without the turbulent effect of a solid obstacle. Ask yourself why windbreak netting – a very popular and widely used product, both domestically and commercially – is so successful? It lets *some* wind through, reduces wind speed and reduces the damaging effect of wind. If it were solid polypropylene, it would take to the sky in the first gale – that's probably how sails were invented. And if you are not yet convinced – walls are for the rich, and fences for the wealthy. Hedging plants are cheap, or can even be free if you have read my previous articles on propagation.

Now down to business. I'll begin with *Rosa rugosa*, simply because I touched on it last month and promised to follow up. In my experience, there is no plant more tolerant of all the extreme conditions we get in the most difficult parts of the UK. It is tolerant of both salt and wind and will grow in poor sandy soils, and even rocky places with very little soil at all. In fact, I cannot think of anywhere *Rosa rugosa* **will not** grow. I have seen it pushing suckers up through tarmac and concrete. It is, in fact, a thug. But there can be times in your life when the help of a thug can be very welcome.









Above: Rosa rugosa *complete with rose-hips.*

Right: Rosa rugosa *on a clifftop; and the stabilising effect of its roots on the ground below.*

Once established, it can get out of hand if you don't take charge. This is because it spreads underground, suckering from its roots, but in certain situations that is a habit with benefits. I planted a *rugosa* hedge several years ago on top of a low but eroding cliff at the edge of a garden that was losing ground to the sea annually. Now the network of *rugosa* roots is actually helping to stabilise the edge, and though some roots get exposed every time there's a storm and high tide combination, the hedge remains intact and less of the garden is washed away. In addition to *R. rugosa* itself, which has pink flowers, you can buy *R. rugosa* 'Rubra' (red) or *R. rugosa* 'Alba' (white). All are equally hardy.

My next suggestion is the *Sambucus* family. I say 'family' deliberately, because the humble elder is not always held in the highest of esteem. The common elder, *Sambucus nigra*, (pictured right), can be found making itself at home in waste ground all over the country, but that doesn't make it a bad plant – it just proves how tolerant and adaptable the family actually is. *Sambucus* is a pioneer and a coloniser. Birds love the abundant berries and poop the seeds here, there and everywhere. So if you are living, gardening or smallholding in a trying location, look to nature – it will always tell you what the best plants are. Elder grows quickly, even in harsh conditions, and will tolerate both windy and salty locations.

The caveat with elder, however, is this – it just doesn't stop growing. In fact it keeps on growing at a rate of knots, so you must be prepared to do some hard cutting back annually. The harder you cut it back, the more vigorously it will regrow, but that's a good thing if your priority is shelter. The wonderful thing about elder is the fact that many of its more attractive progeny are equally hardy. The variegated ones, 'Variegata', and the golden one, *nigra* 'Aurea', make really colourful hedges, and there is even a feathery-leafed cultivar, 'Laciniata', which looks ever so delicate, but is as tough as a rhino's backside in practise. The *Sambucus* family is invaluable when it comes to shelter, and is equally valuable in terms of flowers and fruit. In spring and in autumn, for both birds and winemakers, the elders provide a welcome bounty.

Remember!

Walls block wind, and in doing so they create a turbulence that can do considerable damage to the very same plants you are trying to protect!

My next suggestion may surprise you, but I have used fuchsias for shelter in some very harsh locations. They are actually the predominant hedging plant on the almost treeless island of Orkney, where a gale is 'normal' and a strong wind is considered 'calm'. Obviously, this is not just any fuchsia. Most members of the family are only half-hardy, and





Two other attractive members of the Sambucus *family: cut-leafed* Sambucus nigra *'Laciniata' (above) and* Sambucus nigra *'Aureomarginata' (inset).*



"THE *SAMBUCUS* FAMILY IS INVALUABLE WHEN IT COMES TO SHELTER, AND IS EQUALLY VALUABLE IN TERMS OF FLOWERS AND FRUIT. IN SPRING AND IN AUTUMN, FOR BOTH BIRDS AND WINEMAKERS, THE ELDERS PROVIDE A WELCOME BOUNTY"



"A MIXED NATIVE HEDGE IS A UTOPIA FOR OUR BIRDS AND INSECTS. EVEN IF YOU ONLY HAVE A FEW METRES AVAILABLE..."



Above: Hawthorn blossom.
Right: Fuchsia riccartonii.

are treated as ornamentals and brought into a greenhouse over the winter. There is, however, one member of this family that performs against all odds – *Fuchsia magellicana* 'Riccartonii', more commonly sold simply as *Fuchsia riccartonii*.

Fuchsia riccartonii is totally wind and salt tolerant, but can be susceptible to frost. A short, sharp frost won't bother it, but four or five days (or more) of temperatures consistently below freezing will cause die-back. We don't seem to be getting prolonged frosts like that these days, but it is worth noting for reference. However, in all my years of gardening in the far north, though I have seen *F. riccartonii* knocked back to the base, I have never seen one that did not recover and put new shoots up from ground level. So take a gamble with the climate – the worst that can happen is that it gets totally frosted off, but next spring it will jump away from the base once more. In full flower *Fuchsia riccartonii* is undeniably one of the bonniest hedges you could have.

It is simply in my nature to consider wind, exposure and salt whenever I think of hedging. This comes from where I live and work. I write from my own experience, but if those factors are not your main priority, hedges for wildlife are perhaps something to consider. Hedges are vital for birds and insects, and even in the smallest garden you may have room for a few native hedging plants. I say 'native', because native plants are always best for our native wildlife. A mixed native hedge is a Utopia for our birds and insects. Even if you only have a few metres available – and obviously I'm not talking about shelter or windbreaks here, rather just for its own sake – plant a short hedge of native shrubs including hawthorn, blackthorn, dog rose, guelder rose, spindle, buckthorn, dogwood, and many more.

But planting to help wildlife is a topic for another time. First, we have winter to get through, so for now, good luck with your hedges, and I wish you all success in breaking wind.

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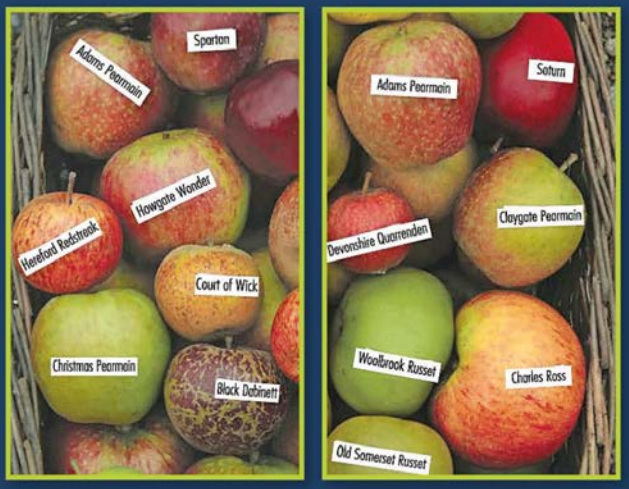
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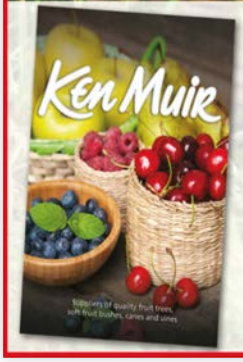
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TAKE YOUR PICK

Tunnel varieties

Andy McKee and **Mark Gatter** consider ways to **make the most** of your **polytunnel's natural advantages** over outdoor beds

Ah, winter. If all went well for you this year – and I hope it did – there's not much to do outside. The tunnel's a pleasant space to potter about in, especially on brighter days, although there's not much to do apart from harvesting from your winter larder (see the box opposite), keeping things shipshape, and maybe topping up any bare ground with fresh compost. So, put your trowel down – it's time to hit the seed catalogues.

But before you reach for your credit card there are a few things to think about when choosing seeds for the polytunnel. You can grow regular stuff, and it'll do just fine, but a few extra tweaks will ensure you're making the most of the tunnel's sheltered, balmy conditions.

FAST-MATURING VEGETABLES

Polytunnels are a bit like wardrobes – you always wish you had more room. Unless you've bought a tunnel the size of an aircraft hangar – which Mark did – every scrap of ground is valuable. On top of this, you'll always be looking to push the limits of your growing season. Fresh turnips and new potatoes on the table for Christmas – what's not to like? It therefore makes sense to concentrate on fast-maturing plants, as they're so much more forgiving.

MOULD RESISTANCE

The biggest problem with polytunnel growing is probably mould. Maximising ventilation, *even in winter*, is counter-intuitive; the temptation to have a lie in on an autumn morning when you should be opening the tunnel is irresistible, and the temptation to stick in a few extra plants (accidentally creating pockets of still, moist air) is too much for many. Do yourself a favour – if a variety is described as mould-resistant, think seriously about it.

ORGANIC

Even if you don't practise organic gardening outdoors, I recommend you choose organically produced seed for the tunnel. Organic varieties are selected for disease resistance – they have to be, since they can't routinely be sprayed – and that means less chance of rapidly spreading nasties later in the year, and you'll probably get better mould resistance, too. Both The Organic Gardening Catalogue (www.OrganicCatalogue.com) and Realseeds (www.realseeds.co.uk) provide organic heritage varieties.

STORING SEED

We all know that seed should be stored in a cool, dark and dry place, but let me spell it out in large letters – **THIS IS THE OPPOSITE OF A POLYTUNNEL!** *Never* store seed in the polytunnel: take in only what you need, and only for as long as you need it!

ANDY'S SEED PICKS FOR 2015

* **LETTUCE**

For colour and variation in salads I usually have at least two varieties of lettuce on the go at once. This year I'll be getting hold of some 'Morton's Secret Mix', a ragtag blend of colours and flavours which has all the variety one salad bowl can handle. My absolute favourite is 'Bunyard's Matchless', a romaine-type lettuce which I got from Garden Organic's Heritage Seed Library a decade ago, and it's one I grow on for fresh

Below: The January bed, with celeriac and broad bean seedlings.



Photo © Mark Gatter.





"ORGANIC VARIETIES ARE SELECTED FOR DISEASE RESISTANCE – THEY HAVE TO BE, SINCE THEY CAN'T ROUTINELY BE SPRAYED"

Choices

In winter there's little to do in the tunnel, so it's time to put down your trowel and pick up your seed catalogues.



THE POLYTUNNEL WINTER LARDER

Here's a quick list of plants that my own polytunnel has given me to eat during January and February (the leanest time of the year in the tunnel – there is no hungry gap in a polytunnel): beetroot, turnip, carrot, celeriac, radish, kohlrabi, cabbage, cauliflower, celery (soup/stock quality), chard, coriander, lettuce, spring onions, oriental greens (pak choi etc.), rocket and spinach. It's worth noting that, with the exception of cabbage, none of the above could readily be grown outdoors at this time in the UK.



Right: Celery will stand under fleece, and although it becomes tough it's still great in soups and stews, where you can blitz it with a food processor.









Above: 'Bunyard's Matchless'.

Right: Cabbage will take as much space as you give it, so don't grow a big one!

seeds every few years. 'Bunyard's Matchless' does well in winter, but this year I'll be trying it against 'Winter Marvel', which is a new one on me. Fingers crossed!

CARROTS

Early 'Nantes 2' is hard to beat for baby carrots, but make sure you buy organically produced seeds. For bigger carrots, try 'Touchon', which are much less likely to crack lengthwise because of fluctuating soil moisture levels in the tunnel – your soil must be in tip-top condition to keep moisture levels constant.

CABBAGE

I've never found anything to beat 'Precoce de Louviers', a French spring cabbage. It's on the small side, but it's ready in just sixteen weeks. If you don't fancy netting the tunnel doors to keep butterflies out, grow it early, before they arrive!

TURNIPS

A friend who scoffed at the idea of polytunnel turnips was silenced by a dish of these young roots in cinnamon butter. I grow 'Milan White' scattered here and there in groups of two or three, just like I do radishes. They grow nearly as quickly, too – just six weeks from packet to plate.

KOHLRABI

Not a traditional veg in the UK, but if you've not tried them, you should!



Kohlrabi 'Gigante' is also worth growing and keeping in for longer, as it doesn't go woody, even when football sized!

'Azur' is quick maturing, tasty and incredibly purple. I prefer them raw in salads or dipped in sweetened vinegar as a snack. In the tunnel, seedlings will stand over winter under fleece for a March harvest (provided the fleece has supports to avoid direct contact with the leaves), so you can be picking it pretty much all year round.

POTATOES

Yep, potatoes in the polytunnel! You can grow super-early potatoes in the tunnel in spring, but that doesn't get me half as excited as producing new potatoes for the Christmas table. Using a really early spud gets around the problem of breaking dormancy; just keep a few of your very first harvest back in the summer and pop them into the tunnel in the second half of September. Be ready to protect the plants with fleece if there's a chance of frost in your tunnel, and the usual 'three Vs' rule applies to prevent mould – Ventilate. Ventilate. Ventilate. Late blight can still be active in September, too, which is why I'm going to try 'Sarpo Una' tubers this year. God loves a trier, as they say…

FURTHER INFO

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PATHWAYS ...to success!

Dave Hamilton takes a look at the different **paving** materials available, from **low-tech** to **hi-tech**, and shows us how best to use them for a **long-lasting** result

Paths are blooming useful things. A good path should be flat to help you push a wheelbarrow to where it needs to go, whereas a bad path is typically full of bumps, dips and craters. In addition to offering access, paths can also act as a natural barrier to prevent weeds sneaking in from the sides of a bed, and they can give a site structure and shape, prettying it up while at the same time giving it purpose.

If you get it right and give the project due time and consideration, a good path should never need replacing. Also, it will most likely cost you a lot of money and take a lot of time to make! There are, however, many different options open to you, and the one you choose will usually depend on many different factors. You might have money to burn and pay a skilled craftsman to put in a path of the finest Cotswold stone. If this is the case, then stop reading now… this article really won't have much to say to you! However, if you are considering laying a path any time between now and early spring, using readily available or recycled materials, and on a budget with you as the 'craftsman', then read on…

NO-TECH AND LOW-TECH PATHS

If you are regularly finding yourself flat on your back more often than you would like to admit due to slippery and uneven paths, or your allotment is looking a bit dishevelled and you are on the lookout for anything from a quick-fix solution to a long-lasting but affordable path, there are some simple solutions which require a minimum of effort and can be quite effective. They will usually need regular maintenance to keep them looking tidy and in tip-top shape, and they will not usually provide easy wheelbarrow access, but they will provide you with a garden path without breaking the bank and in a reasonable time-frame.

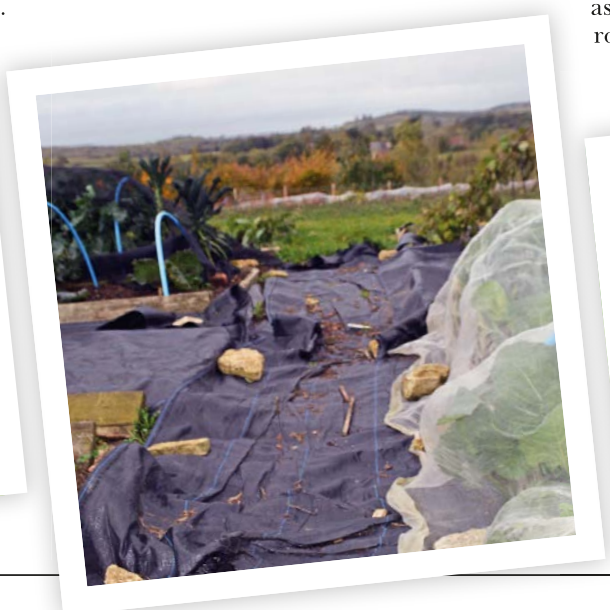
LINES OF DESIRE

Whilst walking in a wood or out in the countryside, you will often see what are referred to as 'lines of desire'. These are simply paths made by many feet repeatedly walking the same route. It is easy to make a path like this – you simply walk along the same strip again and again. To consolidate such a route you could put up canes or logs on each side of the path to ensure that you take the same route, and over time it will become an established path.

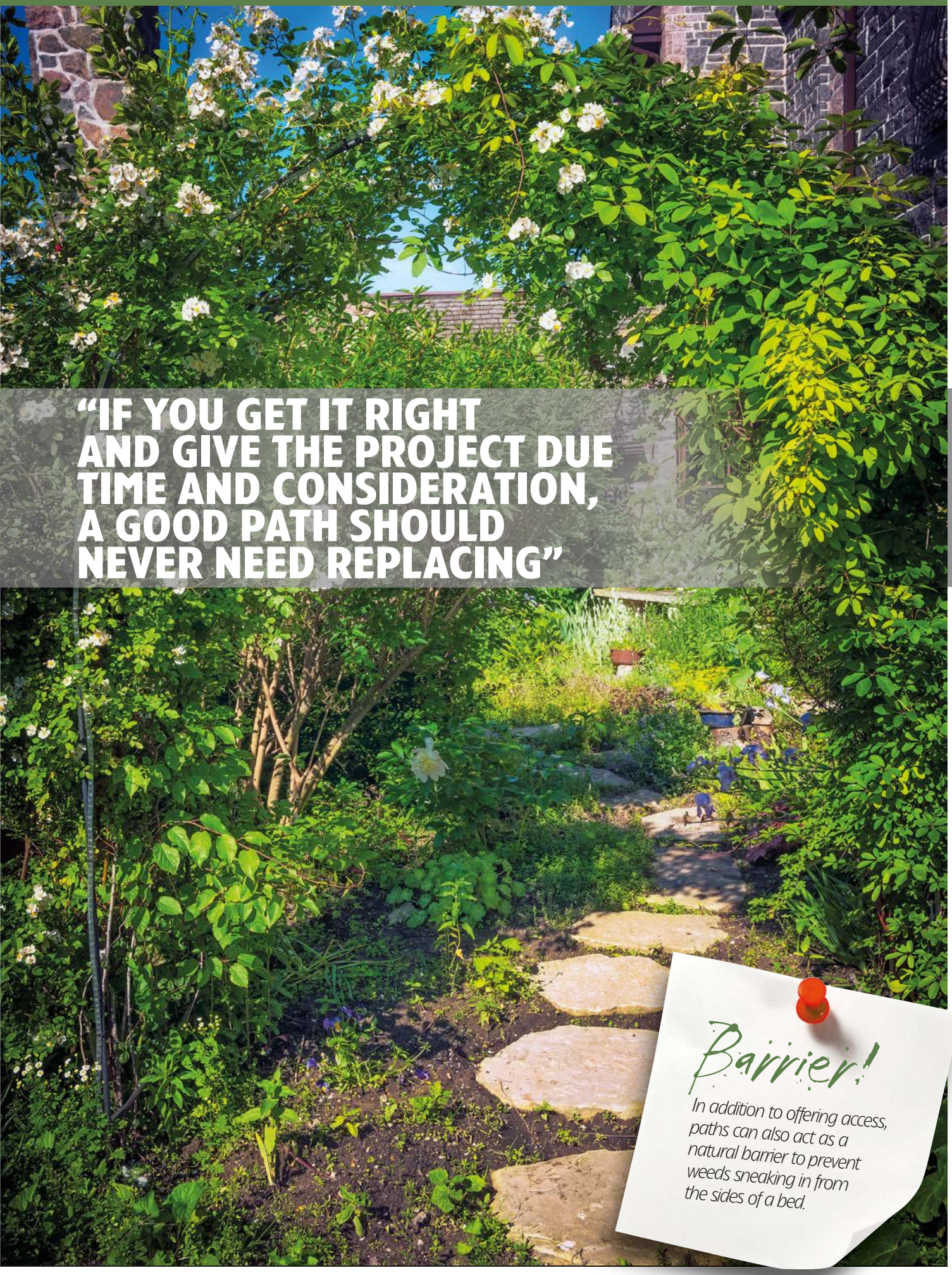
PLANKS

Some gardeners or allotmenteers choose not to have a path at all. Instead, they till the *whole* plot and rely on planks to get from point A to point B. Scaffolding planks are the most useful type for this purpose, and they can be piled up out of the way and then laid down as and when you need them; perhaps acting as a marker for lines of vegetables when not in use as a pathway. They should also adequately spread the weight of a wheelbarrow or a person to prevent soil compaction, especially during wet weather. There are numerous advantages to the simple plank option; for example, you can have easy access to all areas, meaning that any weeds can be removed as soon as they arrive, and there is little room for pests to emerge.









"IF YOU GET IT RIGHT AND GIVE THE PROJECT DUE TIME AND CONSIDERATION, A GOOD PATH SHOULD NEVER NEED REPLACING"

Barrier!

In addition to offering access, paths can also act as a natural barrier to prevent weeds sneaking in from the sides of a bed.





Above: A downside is the fact that a woodchip path could unintentionally introduce honey fungus into your garden.



WEED-SUPPRESSANT MATERIAL

It is quite easy to get hold of sheets of weed-suppressant material. Farmers and smallholders may have offcuts they would be willing to give or sell you, and it is not overly expensive to buy, either. To make a path with it really couldn't be easier: you simply lay it down where it needs to go! You can then top it with woodchips (see below) or some other material to make a nicer-looking and harder-wearing path.

WOODCHIP PATHS

Another no-tech or low-tech option is simply to bung a load of woodchip down where you want the path. This can be particularly useful if your ground gets wet, as it will help to soak up any moisture. Woodchip will need replacing from time to time, but it can last for up to a year, and last year's path can be composted if mixed with a good source of nitrogen.

You can either simply clear the ground where you want the path to go, or add a layer of wetted cardboard or newspaper, then lay 2.5–5cm of woodchip down and walk over it a few times to compact it. If you can't find a reasonably priced source of woodchip, ask your local council or contact some local tree surgeons. It might not be free, but it will certainly be a lot cheaper than buying-in woodchip from a DIY store! Without a layer of weed-suppressant material, weeds will begin to grow through before too long, so a combination of the two is always the more practical option.

HI-TECH PATHS

These are generally going to be more costly and time-consuming projects, but they will typically last for many years if planned well and carried out with sufficient preparation and decent materials. Always go for the best quality materials you can reasonably afford, and do them justice by doing a proper job, otherwise you would have been better off going for a low-tech option!

STEPPING STONES

Stepping stones are ideal for any large beds you may want to walk across without causing compaction to the soil. They are also useful on lawns for the same reason, especially during wet

PROS AND CONS OF THE VARIOUS PATHS

TYPE OF PATH	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
Lines of desire	Free and very easy to install.	Can get muddy and won't help keep weeds down.
Planks	Cheap, easy, and allow for full cultivation of the plot.	Slippery, unsightly, need a storage place, and can attract slugs.
Weed-suppressant material	Really easy to put in.	Attracts slugs and can be slippery.
Woodchip	Cheap, easy to put in and soaks up moisture.	A possible way to introduce honey fungus into your garden.
Stepping stones	Allow for lots of land to be cultivated, and the materials are easy to source.	Not very good for using wheelbarrows.
Stone/brick paths	Attractive, allow movement of wheelbarrows, and make good access for toddlers.	Time-consuming and usually expensive to install.



weather. They can also add an element of fun to a garden, as there is something very childlike and playful about leaping from one stone to the next. These patterns can also look rather attractive, breaking up a garden in an intentionally slightly random way.

Place each stone a comfortable stride's length apart. If you have a shorter partner, it is always a good idea to consider their height, too, when determining spacing! Dig out a hole for each stone to slot in, with a little extra room for it to settle over time. You can mark out the size by using a stepping stone as a template (or each individual one, if using different shapes) and cutting around it with a sharp knife. Then, once you have dug it out to the correct depth, add a layer of sand and put the stone in place! In addition to using round stones intended for the purpose, you could also use old patio slabs or a couple of bricks for each stone. Narrow sections of tree trunk also work to a degree, but they can get a little slippery over time during lengthy bouts of wet or frosty weather.

STONE/BRICK PATHS

There are two ways to make these – the rough way or the permanent way. The rough way is to just put down the stones in place, perhaps with a layer of sand beneath them to allow them to settle properly and to facilitate decent drainage.

The permanent way is of course a little bit more complicated, time-consuming and usually tends to cost more. You will have to dig out a large trench about 30cm deep. This trench should be marked out on either side to the length of your path using string, taking into consideration any bends or curves. Fill in the trench with hard core material (usually building rubbish) almost to the surface level, then cover it with a layer of scalpings (finer rubble) and/or sand, ensuring you get it as flat as you can by using a large spirit-level, or a smaller level on a flat plank. Then lay the stones on top, again using a spirit-level to make sure they are placed correctly. If any stones are not level, or they rock, take them up and adjust the base using builders' sand. Replace the stone, then tamp it into place using either your foot or a mallet. Finish off by brushing dry mortar into the gaps between the stones. Tamp this down to create a solid filler, then leave overnight to harden on contact with moisture in the air. Once opened, a pack of mortar must be used straightaway, as the hardening process will begin immediately on contact with the air.





Top Tips

- Spend time preparing before putting down the final layer of whatever material you are using.
- Make sure that any hard surface does not rock, or it could result in an accident.
- 

  If using any of the low-tech materials, keep on top by carrying out regular repairs and tidying up the edges. A woodchip path can rapidly disappear if not given regular attention.
- If using stepping stones on any surface other than grass, fix them down firmly or they will be dangerous.
- If using any hard materials, they will become slippery as moss builds up – hose or power-wash them regularly, but not if frost is likely.
- If using bricks in soil, placing them in the ground vertically will reduce compaction.
- Devote as much time and expense to the job as you reasonably can if you want a result to be proud of!
- If possible, create a proper edging for your path, especially if you opt for a low-tech option, as this will prevent soil creeping into it. It will also look tidier.

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USEFUL

Non-food crops

This month **Benjamin Crosby** considers some useful **non-food crops** for his **low-impact acre** of land

Non-food crops are those that provide building materials such as wood, paints, preservatives and fibre, or pharmaceuticals, bioenergy products, tools and decorative materials, although some may have edible qualities as well. So far I have steered clear of anything other than what can be eaten, because I want the plot to remain low maintenance and I'd rather not spend time and effort maintaining crops not directly of health benefit. I had intended to utilise only what grows naturally on the site, or what can be sourced locally for the construction of tools, clothing and shelters, etc.

Those species that germinate naturally on the site could be multiplied, if necessary, but at least I would know they grow easily and naturally in the environment that the plot offers. I have found dogwood and blackthorn saplings growing on the plot, or close by, which could eventually be utilised as skewers, fencing stakes and binders for hedgelaying, or wattle hurdles. Oak saplings are also abundant and could be used for all manner of greenwood-work purposes in time.

Importantly, I do not want to plant a monocultured bed of plants requiring regular weeding or maintenance; I would rather they feature in small numbers randomly across the site, providing only enough for my own uses. Due to the limited diversity of non-food products obtainable on the plot, many materials *will* have to be sought locally or grown on the plot. The following options are based in part on conditions on the site and what can already be found on the site or locally. I have not based the list on the materials I need for future projects, as I would rather establish species suited to the site's environment. Bamboo has been included as something of a wild card.







LIME

(*Tilia* sp.)
The small-leafed lime (*Tilia cordata*) and broad-leafed lime (*Tilia platyphyllos*) are the only limes native to Great Britain. They are not exotic limes like (*Citrus aurantifolia*), which produces citrus fruit, but rather two great domed tree species growing to around forty metres high, which are believed to have once been a common woodland tree in England. Their decline is probably due in part to their palatability to livestock. It is likely that their numbers fell during land clearances by our primitive ancestors, who felled trees like the lime for easy-to-carve wood and for creating pasture, with their coppiced stools then being persistently browsed by livestock and never able to recover. The sweet sap of the lime has apparently been boiled down in the past to make sugar, so I expect young lime shoots are quite a delicacy for livestock and browsing wildlife.

Today, there are not many, if any, to be seen in the wilds of Essex, and most have probably been planted deliberately. Lime is so easy to use and has so many practical and edible uses that it is ideally suited to us humans. The wood is easily worked, and according to *The Encyclopedia of Wood*, edited by Aidan Walker, "It is in effect a soft hardwood… one of few woods soft enough to be fashioned with stone tools". It is ideal for carving and turning to make treen, such as kitchenware, and the inner bark is also one of the most notable in Great Britain for making natural cordage; and if all these qualities were not enough, the young leaves can also be eaten in salads.

The sporadic presence of lime trees in this part of Essex casts some doubt over whether they are suited to the plot. It would appear they are most abundant in limestone regions, but unfortunately it is all clay, sand or shingle here. My vision of an ancient Essex countryside is one primarily of oak, ash and field maple, with a great deal of thorny scrub in marginal and coastal areas, and tracts of black poplar and goat, white and crack willow and alder in riverside valleys, water meadows and marshy ground, with birch occurring only on sandy, acidic heathland soils. In my opinion, much of the local hornbeam and sweet chestnut woods have simply been planted and expanded in centuries past for coppice products. In the few areas of what I would call natural woodland in eastern Essex, oak, ash, field maple and wild service tree seem prevalent, but not the neighbouring hornbeam.

Ash trees survive best in the middle of wooded areas due to their quick growth, tall height and easily wind-damaged branches. This is why the few you find in hedgerows around here are usually in a poor state. What I have not seen is hornbeam in local hedgerows, and furthermore I have not seen many lime trees on my travels, despite their ability to grow well on these soils. I expect the Essex soils are a marginal environment for limes, as they occur more frequently on limestone. Nonetheless, they probably would have been prevalent locally in millennia past, but less numerous. I have found it a good idea to explore the local area to get a better idea of the cultural and natural history of the region; rather than just taking a stroll for the sake of it, I tend to pay attention to the environment around me.

So, in conclusion, at least for the time being, I will not be establishing lime trees on the plot.

COMMON REED

(*Phragmites australis*)
Reeds are a perennial, forming vast stands that grow two metres tall. They are sometimes found along ditches, but are common on marshes and damp ground near ponds and on fresh water close to the coast. They are traditionally regarded as the longest-lasting thatching material, and unlike straw are natural in the sense that they exist in nearly pure stands without cultivation and management by us.

I expect reeds were used abundantly by our ancestors in Essex for thatching, as marshland was vast and the habitat for reeds existed. Today, most of Essex has been thoroughly drained for agricultural purposes, and most coastal marshland has been drained and reclaimed for farming, so reeds make do in marginal areas, often left for their wildlife conservation value. Unfortunately, this means there is little available locally for anyone looking to thatch a building, so you have to look to Norfolk or further afield in Europe, which means higher costs.

I have considered growing reeds on the plot, but given the quantities required to thatch just the roof of a shelter or garden shed, and their preference for growing in permanently damp marsh or ditch-side environments, which are lacking on the plot, I have little option but to reject establishing them for thatching. They could be utilised to establish a reed bed system for greywater and a

useful!

Non-food crops include those that provide materials such as wood, paints, preservatives, fibre, pharmaceuticals and bioenergy products.



toilet, but I have no plans to build such a system on the plot. If it was larger – say three acres – I would have seriously considered establishing them here, but to acquire enough material in a short time to thatch even a small building, most of the one-acre plot would need to be covered with reeds!

TEASEL

(*Dipsacus fullonum* and *D. sativus*)
The native wild teasel (*Dipsacus fullonum*) is a biennial producing a rosette of spiny green leaves in its first year, culminating in a vigorous flower shoot around two metres tall – often taller in its second year. They feature abundantly near the Woodside plot due to the often wet clay soil of the site. Despite its Latin name, *Dipsacus fullonum* is the original native teasel and not the 'Fullers' teasel (*Dipsacus sativus*), which is in fact the traditionally cultivated subspecies of our native teasel, but not native to Great Britain. Both can be used for carding wool and raising the nap on woollen cloth, although *Dipsacus sativus* was preferred due to its hooked spines. Raising the nap thickens the cloth by matting together the fibres, and the nap is then trimmed.

Raw wool was originally carded with teasel heads prior to spinning. Carding brings the fibres in the wool into parallel alignment and helps remove dirt and debris. Teasel heads were ideal because of their abundant spines. To card wool, the heads, with part of the stalk still attached, can be mounted into a simple wooden frame with a handle to make a card. Cards with metal hooks are used by hobbyists today.

Hopefully, I will utilise teasels for these same purposes. They are already abundant locally and near the plot, and will no doubt be found on the plot naturally in due course. They are a fantastic example of a species often regarded as a weed which is not particularly edible to livestock but with an easy-to-procure, practical use, and although spiny they are not dangerous in the sense that blackthorn or hawthorn can be.

BAMBOO

(*Phyllostachys aurea* and *P. bambusoides*)
Bamboo is a popular choice for gardeners because not only is it a structurally attractive evergreen that offers screening, it also provides some sturdy canes for supporting climbing plants, young trees and shrubs, or for making fence panels and screens. There are not many hardy species suited to our climate that yield long and sturdy canes – *Phyllostachys aurea* (Golden Bamboo) and *Phyllostachys bambusoides* (Giant Timber Bamboo) are two of them. They prefer moist soil, are clump forming, and could spread almost indefinitely. Despite the fantastic array of uses that bamboo has, I have little use for canes themselves, as I can source rods/wands from other native species, if necessary. Furthermore, they are not native to Great Britain, which reduces their appeal to me.









"...I INTEND TO UTILISE WITHIES FOR A SMALL AMOUNT OF BASKET-MAKING OR AS BINDING MATERIALS AS THE PROJECT DEVELOPS..."



WILLOW AND OSIER

(*Salix* sp.)

Willows and osiers can be found locally and are in many ways ideally suited to the plot. They tolerate wet soils, grow well on clay, are eminently edible for livestock, and have a multitude of practical uses, including basket-making and cordage. Osier (*Salix viminalis*) and purple osier (*Salix purpurea*) are small, shrubby trees commonly and traditionally coppiced for basketry. There are also many other cultivars and hybrids used for basketry and biofuel. Personally, I intend to utilise withies for a small amount of basket-making or as binding materials as the project develops, but it may also be possible to utilise the inner bark for the making of cordage for building projects and personal effects on the plot.

FURTHER INFO

Visit **www.woodsideproject.co.uk** to discover the background history behind the project and to keep updated with developments on the plot via the blog.

Unfortunately, osiers and willows, like reeds, are required in very large numbers to obtain sufficient for many of their uses, such as woven fence panels, binders for hedgelaying and 'fedges' (living willow fences). Being fantastic fodder for livestock, the unnatural pollard or coppiced form of osiers are often stripped of bark, or their withies are broken, wounded or misshapen by browsing livestock, so, unless they are long established and stocky, they would not last long. This makes them high maintenance and very vulnerable on a one-acre, low-maintenance plot.

To keep them safe on the plot, large numbers would have to be grouped together and fenced off separately from livestock. To prevent loss of growth due to competition, coppiced stools may also need to be grown separately from other trees, defeating the object of having an integrated, natural plot.

I do not want to come up with any clever permaculture ways of disguising such trees or deterring livestock, as it'll all be a lot of unreliable hassle for little gain and out of touch with the low-maintenance nature of the plot.

Despite some of the risks of growing willow on the plot I still intend to utilise the common osier (*Salix viminalis*). I will set two plants on the island in the pond – at least there they will be out of reach – and I will also experimentally place two randomly across the plot. I do not intend to pollard or coppice any of the osiers I plant. The problem will be in sourcing seed-grown stock, but if I cannot source any I will plant hardwood cuttings this winter.

NEXT MONTH

I will be preparing the no-dig vegetable beds on the low-impact plot.

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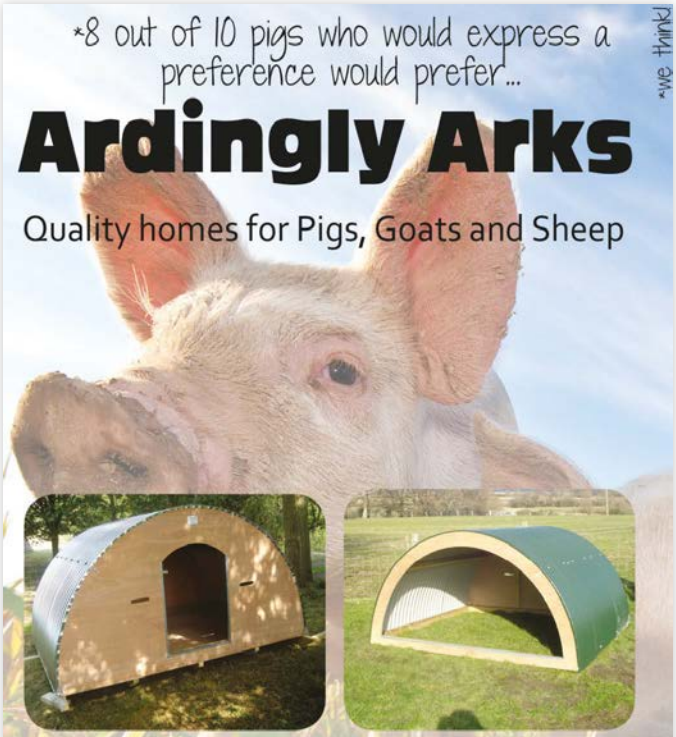
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PART ONE

WALKING in a Winter Wonderland

Everything **slows** down in **winter**, but there remains **edible bounty** for the observant forager. **David Winnard** is on the case and will use some of this month's **findings** to make **tinctures**, **tonics**, **teas** and **syrups** next month

People think the foraging season is over, with nothing more to find and a long wait till spring before we can gather more wild edibles. How wrong they are. At this time of year I like to make the three 'T's – tinctures, tonics and teas – so this month I am writing my article as a two-parter: in this issue I'm concentrating on finding a few different species that we shall then use next month to make some of those three 'T's. This month we shall learn to identify each one, and next month we shall create some foraging wizardry! So now is the time to get looking and collecting, and drying and storing, and next month you should end up with a few weird and wonderful creations that will both inspire and amaze you.

So, is there really still plenty to forage for in the wintry months? Well, the simple answer is, "Yes!" There is still a wide variety of things to find, although nowhere near as many as during the other three seasons. You will have to be a little bit more creative – in fact, when you read about one of them in particular you will think I am out of my mind on mushrooms (the good kind, obviously). It is all about knowing where to look, but that is always half the battle with foraging; different habitats have totally different species, and at certain times of the year some habitats are always going to be better than others. Fungi are the prime examples of this. Many people who come out looking for fungi with me are amazed at just how many species we find, saying that they never see mushrooms and other fungi when they go for a walk. It is really just a matter of opening your eyes when outside and knowing how and where to look for them. Then, armed with this skill, the same people start sending me lots of emails telling me that now they can't really go out without seeing loads! To help I have included two species this month to get you out and about looking for useful fungi in different places.

SEA BUCKTHORN

(Hippophae rhamnoides)

This is a plant I love and hate in equal measure (pictured below). On the one hand the berries that Sea Buckthorn produces are wonderful – small orange beads full of vitamin C with great immune-boosting benefits. The flavour is also totally different to any berry you can normally find wild in the UK, with a strong citrus smell somewhere between orange, peach and lychee. They are also very abundant in coastal areas, especially around sand dunes, often carpeting an entire area. Each bush can contain thousands of berries, so theoretically you will be able to collect lots in a very short space of time. I say 'theoretically', though, because in reality you will get very annoyed very quickly if trying to pick lots from this particular plant, as it is protected by many, many, many thorns – very sharp thorns that not only prick but can easily inflict quite a nasty wound.

The berries themselves are quite bitter and it is best to put them in the freezer for about a week to take away some of this bitterness, depending on just what type of flavour you are aiming for.

Another teasing thing about the berries is that when you go to collect them they are fragile and crush very easily, so you can often find yourself struggling to get any whole ones in the bag! Some say the best way to collect Sea Buckthorn is to cut off some of the stems with the berries intact and put the whole thing straight in the freezer. Then when the berries are rock hard, remove them from the stems, but this obviously damages the plant, and whilst there is always an abundance of berries and Sea Buckthorn, I just cannot bring myself to do it, so I just grin and bear it as I pick them from the bush. *Just wear thick gloves!* But is it worth it? Yes, I like the flavour and it gives me something unique to use in my kitchen. The syrup I make from it is great for cocktails. Next month we shall make a Sea Buckthorn syrup, but don't worry – you won't need many berries (just 100–200g), so pick them and store them in the freezer until the next issue.





Sure?

I cannot stress enough how important it is to use a good field guide, and to be **100% certain** you know what it is you are foraging.

"...IT IS ONLY NOW BECOMING UNDERSTOOD JUST HOW GOOD FOR YOU THIS MUSHROOM ACTUALLY IS"

Turkey Tail
(Trametes versicolor).

"IT IS ALL ABOUT KNOWING WHERE TO LOOK, BUT THAT IS ALWAYS HALF THE BATTLE WITH FORAGING"

TURKEY TAIL

(Trametes versicolor)

Why is it called Turkey Tail? Well, it just looks like a turkey's tail, although the old name I knew for it when growing up was 'many-zoned polypore', because it has many zones of colour in the fruiting body (pictured below). This is one of the key but variable features of this species – white underneath but with a top with lots of concentric circles of colour; some are more blue, some more brown, and others almost black and so on, but always with distinctive rings.

Is it edible? Well, not in the sense that you would want to cook and eat it (it's too leathery for that), but it is used to make tea. If it is not worth cooking and tastes rather earthy – not a bad thing in itself – why do we bother with this species? It's simply because it is only now becoming understood just how good for you this mushroom actually is. Research has shown that Turkey Tail massively boosts T-helper cells in the body and boosts your immune system. It has been found to be effective in treating flu (including H1N1), and in helping in the treatment of cancers. And although it would be foolish to say that such things alone might cure these problems, they may well have a role as an aid in the fight against them, working alongside traditional treatments. Potentially, the health properties of this fungus could have massive implications. But it is not just Turkey Tail; there is now a whole range of fungal flu vaccines coming onto the market made from a variety of woodland fungi – usually bracket-type fungi like the Hoof Fungus – so I imagine that in a few years' time we shall hear more about these remarkable fungi. But in the meantime, a simple tea or tincture made using Turkey Tail should certainly help to boost your immune system, which is no bad thing at this time of year, and next month I shall be showing you just how to make them. So, pick about 100g, dry them and store them ready for next month.



CHICKWEED

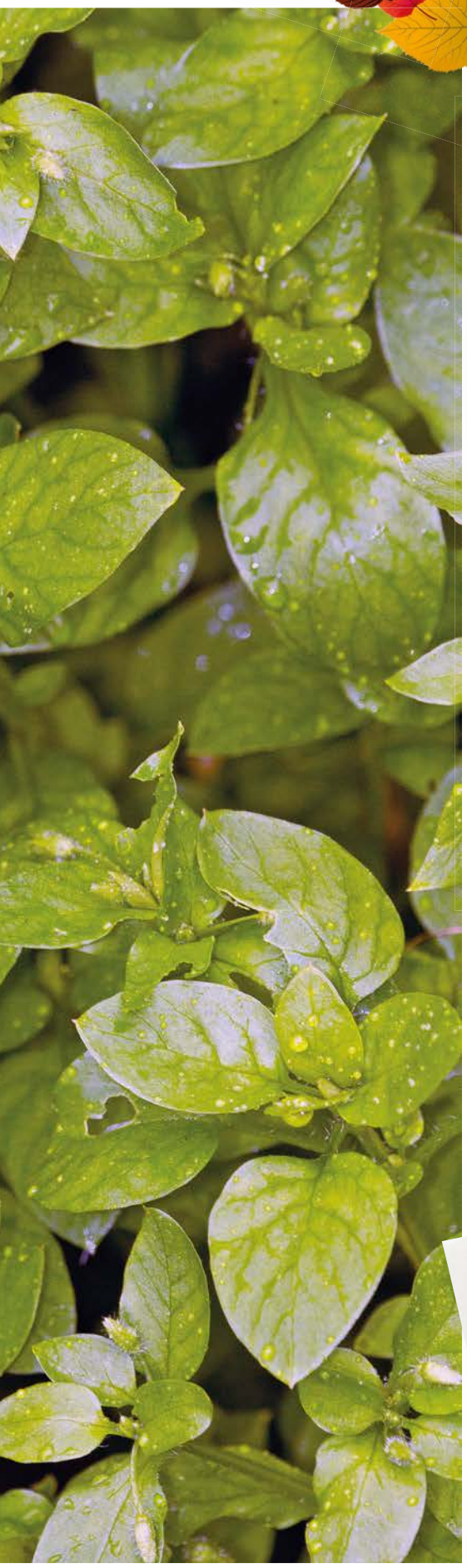
(Stellaria media)

Don't you just love anything with the name 'weed' in it; it usually means it's common, and if it is common then we won't have any problems getting our hands on some. Chickweed (pictured right) is certainly very common around houses, in gardens and on allotments, and can be found just about everywhere, yet it is a good-tasting plant with many benefits. Traditionally, you can dry it and make tea with it, and it is understood to be good for the liver and kidneys, and can help with skin conditions and lung problems, and has anti-inflammatory properties too.

Chickweed has small, star-like flowers, but there are others in the same family that also have these. It looks rather smooth (or rather not particularly hairy) and remains quite common during the winter months, but always use a field guide to get to grips with it to be *100% certain*. Many of you may already know this plant from the allotment, and the leaves can be added straight to salads and even soups once washed, but for next month you will need to pick, dry and store some ready for making chickweed tea, which, by the way, is hugely expensive in health food stores.

Also, as the name might infer, your hens will love a little chickweed thrown into their run – it will keep them happy for ages!







MEADOW WAXCAP

(Hygrocybe pratensis)

This is the last mushroom I shall be including for quite some time (although not the last fungus). Waxcaps are a large family of mushrooms that generally like to live in mossy grassland, such as the uplands near to me, which are grazed by sheep. This is the perfect habitat, but you can also find them in mossy garden lawns too! Waxcaps have a rather distinctive feature: their caps are rather waxy and come in all sorts of colours, from green, red, orange, yellow and grey, through to white. The Meadow Waxcap (pictured right) xis the largest of them and, when fresh, has a lovely terracotta-coloured cap, pale, rather thick and widely spaced gills, and a pale stem.

Waxcaps traditionally thrive in the latter part of the autumn. They do not like frost, but as long as we don't get a really hard one you will find them right the way through to late winter. They are edible and tasty too, but often neglected by foragers, who favour other woodland varieties. Whilst they are unlikely to be confused with anything else growing in upland grassland habitat, always check your finds using a good field guide. You can dry and store them, but I love having them with peppers and courgettes in a Spanish omelette.

Query!

People often ask me: "Is there really plenty to forage for in winter?" My simple answer is: "Yes!" It's all about knowing where to look.

So, there you have it – a selection of species to sink your teeth into this month. We shall also be using three of them next month to make a variety of tinctures, teas, tonics and syrups that should keep you going strong for some time – *Happy Foraging!*

FARMSTART

A commercial farming intro

Marie-Claire Kidd visits a **scheme** in the North West which enables **prospective market gardeners** to test the water and their own **abilities** before taking the plunge into the **commercial reality**

It has already been adopted enthusiastically in North America, and now FarmStart, a programme which enables new growers to test their business plans and skills in a low-risk environment, is beginning to take hold in the UK. Sustainability charity, The Kindling Trust, has set up Britain's first and only commercial grower incubator at Abbey Leys Farm in Cheshire. Known as FarmStart Manchester, it launched on a two-acre site in March 2013, giving eight novice farmers a low-cost, low-risk route into market gardening. The growers harvested and sold their first crops in June, and all but one continued into year two of the five-year programme. This year they were joined by another six people, and the scheme is now looking to expand onto other sites in the Manchester area.

In January, FarmStart Manchester received a major boost thanks to a £50,000 award from The Prince's Countryside Fund. The Fund supports projects and organisations which address five key issues facing rural Britain: low farming incomes, rural isolation, lack of access to training, decline of rural communities, and disconnect with the countryside. Over three years this grant will allow The Kindling Trust to establish ten new FarmStart businesses and provide comprehensive training in organic food production for ninety individuals. Chris Walsh, a director at Kindling, said: "FarmStart is a new innovation for the UK, and this will allow us to refine and develop the model. In the longer term we'd like to move to a situation where every part of Greater Manchester has an incubator farm nearby."

FarmStart is based on a model which has spread throughout North America during the past fifteen years. For an affordable fee – in this case £400 – new growers join as TestCroppers, renting a quarter or an eighth of an acre for one year. They benefit from a supported environment, which at FarmStart Manchester includes Soil Association certification and access to facilities including a tractor, some tools, a shipping container for storage, a packing area, a compost toilet and a polytunnel. There is also training, including crop planning, marketing, packing, finance, bookkeeping and Soil Association requirements. Crucially, the growers also tap into a ready market.

The farm shop at Abbey Leys is keen to buy fruit and veg from the novices, and a network of shops and restaurants established by another of Kindling's projects, Manchester Veg People (MVP), provides a route into the thriving Manchester market. Helen Woodcock, a director at Kindling, explained: "We set up FarmStart to meet the demand from our organic fruit and vegetable co-operative, MVP. MVP brought together a range of independent shops, restaurants and growers. The growers told us that they couldn't find markets, and the shops and restaurants said they couldn't source local produce, but if they could they'd buy it. The only way to improve this was by working together."



Helen Woodcock – a director at The Kindling Trust.



Left: The use of a polytunnel helps to get the most from the UK growing season.



Above: Tractor work and other support is carried out by The Kindling Trust.

US Import



In Canada, FarmStart is well established and enjoys financial support from the government. One of the country's largest programmes, Ontario FarmStart, was incorporated in 2005. It began as a 'Start-Up Farm' near Guelph, just over an hour's drive from Toronto. The aim was to provide a supportive and relatively risk-free way for people from non-farming backgrounds to enter the sector. Now there are four 'Start-Up Farms' of around fifty acres each, with another two in development. These farms provide access to land, infrastructure and equipment, technical training, business planning skills, development and mentorship for up to six years.

'Test Farmers' can access a quarter-acre of land to grow and test market products, while researching and developing their business goals and plans. They stay on the land for a year, from March until November.

New farmers are also able to apply to manage and maintain their own plots, ranging from 500 square feet (for example, for a bee-keeper) to four acres (perhaps for a market garden). More land is sometimes offered, depending on the land available and the operation.

These businesses are considered 'Start-Up Farms' for three years, during which time they benefit from twenty per cent cost sharing. After the third season, the farms rewrite their business plans and become Enterprise Farms, with some expanding their acreage. They enjoy support from FarmStart for a further two years, but pay full costs.

FarmStart helps the budding farmers prepare, research and make the transition to their own farm property. Some farms stay on as 'Mentor Farms', offering mentorship and helping to run the farm. The original farm in Guelph was inspired by the Intervale Center in Burlington, Vermont, which has been running a FarmStart programme since 1990. The Intervale, which covers 700 acres, had a long farming history, but flooding, road building and landfill had led the farmers to leave and fly-tippers to move in. The community, led by Will Raap of the Gardener's Supply Company, removed the waste, remediated the soils through composting and started gardening and farming. Intervale became an agricultural, educational and recreational resource that is still going strong today.

MVP went from four growers and two buyers in 2009, to eight growers and twenty-six buyers in 2013, and it is still expanding. Alongside MVP, Kindling established the Greater Manchester Land Army, a pool of volunteers who offer to help at organic and community farms at busy times. This provided enthusiastic candidates for FarmStart who came with some experience and understanding of how hard farmwork can be. Tim Harrison of Abbey Leys Farm commented: "The Land Army did a bit of weeding for us and then they were helping to pick potatoes. It was useful. We've got salad potatoes and you can't dig them with a machine. It was really interesting meeting people who came out of Manchester, and they're keen to learn. They realise it's not easy. I think the more people who can try and grow food the better. The idea of council farms was a good idea, but most councils seem to be selling their farms. There's a big demand."

TestCroppers are selected for their experience and because they are serious about growing commercially. "Access to land, capital and mentoring can seem like huge barriers to starting out on a farming career," says Helen. "We're hoping this



Boost!

FarmStart Manchester received a major boost thanks to a £50,000 award from the Prince's Countryside Fund.

"IT'S HARD TO PUT INTO WORDS THE FEELING OF SEEING MY LETTUCES ON THE SHELF AT A LOCAL GROCERY..."

MINI PROFILE: ABBEY LEYS FARM



HISTORY

Tim Harrison's grandfather, Ernest, a tailor from Sale, bought Abbey Leys Farm in the 1930s. Initially the focus was on hen breeding. During the 1950s, egg production began to take precedence and that has been the case ever since. Spurred on by requests at farmers' markets, Tim and Janet Harrison began converting to organic farming in 1998 and became Soil Association certified in 2000.

LOCATION

Abbey Leys Farm occupies a flat, fertile site near Knutsford in Cheshire, fifteen miles to the south-west of Manchester. Close to the M56, it enjoys quick access to the city and the affluent markets of north Cheshire.

ACREAGE

The farm covers eighty

could be an answer. This is a chance to see if farming suits them, and to put their ideas to the test." And some of the growers are already showing entrepreneurial flair; Lindsay Whalen, who has trained in horticulture and worked at a market garden, now holds her own stalls at farmers' markets, as well as supplying MVP and Abbey Leys Farm.

Many of the growers do the bulk of their farming at the weekends, fitting it around a full-time or part-time job. Frank, a landscape gardener, commutes from Liverpool. There is also Simon (an IT worker), Julian (who works at a greengrocer's) and Caroline (who works for the BBC). Many come with experience of allotments, and others have worked for the Greater Manchester Land Army.

For film-maker, Caroline Ward, FarmStart has opened up a new career opportunity. "An impossible idea – organic farming – suddenly became possible," she says. "It's been quite a journey already." Last year she grew purple sprouting broccoli, lettuces and shallots on half an acre, which she sold to the Unicorn Grocery in Chorlton, Manchester. "It's hard to put into words the feeling of seeing my lettuces on the shelf at a local grocery," she says. "I had a big smile knowing that my first crops have entered the organic farming system. I have a product and it's come from a responsible way of farming. I joined the programme with amateur growing experience, no background in farming or family links, no experience of official organic standards and no capital to buy a field. The FarmStart programme allowed me to channel my passion and values and to take risks, while introducing me to the world of preparing, growing, distributing and selling food. For me, this is the right route to farming. Going to college or doing a placement wouldn't have had quite the same effect."





Above: Caroline Ward, who describes FarmStart as "opening up a new career opportunity".

Left: The availability of the FarmStart packing shed enables people to convert their veg into produce for the market. Photo ©David Oates.

Olivia Glasser, a part-time teaching assistant, joined this year. She shares a plot with her partner Alex Linderholm and their friend Owen Adams. Last year they volunteered regularly at Glebelands City Growers in Sale. "We learned so much just through doing tasks for them, and they were so willing to help us," she said.

The growers work with MVP on a cycle which commits them to supplying at least one box of each product per week for eight weeks – a big challenge for novice growers. "With volunteering we didn't do the whole planning process," Olivia says. "This gave us the chance to do that." "We've all found we love it," she adds. "We'd like to expand, it's just a matter of deciding how to do that."

Another challenge for the growers is to cover costs during the first year while they buy tools, seeds, transport, etc. Helen says that the aim in year one is to break even. Then, if their business proves viable, TestCroppers go on as FarmStarters and can choose to expand onto further quarter-acre sections each year for four years, when they should be ready to move on to their own farms.

"We want to see more people growing food around Greater Manchester, and we need more suppliers for MVP," said Chris. "Abbey Leys want home-grown vegetables for their farm shop, and there is plenty of scope for attending local farmers' markets. By trying to remove the barriers that stop people getting started in vegetable production, we hope to make it possible for a new generation of growers to emerge."

For applications to join FarmStart in 2015, see The Kindling Trust's website for details: www.kindling.org.uk/farmstart.

For an affordable fee, new growers join as TestCroppers, renting a quarter or an eighth of an acre for one year.

✳ **All photos are ©Joneve Murphy unless otherwise stated.**

acres, two of which are devoted to FarmStart. The Harrisons grow cereal for chicken feed on twenty-two acres and a variety of potatoes over one acre, with most of the remainder clover leys.

FAMILY

Tim and Janet Harrison are aided by their son, Shaun (18), who works part-time at the farm, and their daughter, Rosemary (24), who recently completed a countryside management degree at Harper Adams University College in Shropshire.

EGG PRODUCTION

The Harrisons keep around 2,000 hens, mostly modern hybrids, in small sheds housing between 100 and 500 birds. To add variety and colour they keep around 150 rare breeds, including Speckledys, which produce attractive spotty eggs, and Leghorn–Araucana crosses, which produce a delicately coloured bluish egg. They buy organic feed from Hi Peak Organic Feeds, but supplement this with their own cereals, peas, beans and lupins.

MARKETS

The farm shop at Abbey Leys has been trading for forty years. It sells fruit and vegetables from FarmStart as well as the Harrisons' eggs and potatoes. Janet attends around ten farmers' markets per month and organises a farmers' market at the farm on the first Sunday of each month. The Harrisons also sell eggs to local organic box schemes and to organic wholesalers at Smithfield Market in Manchester.

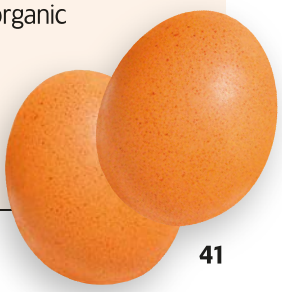


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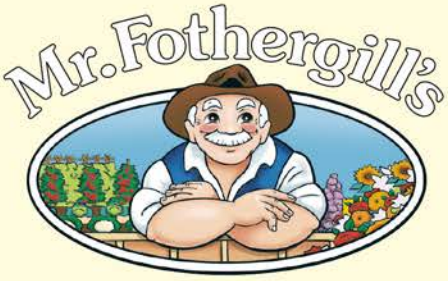
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COMFREY tea anyone?

John Butterworth was so impressed by the **properties** and **hardiness** of **comfrey** that he **built** an outdoor and an indoor **composter** to process it. Here's how he did it

This month, driven by the very healthy-looking patch of comfrey growing right outside the polytunnel – still green, lush and flowering in October – I thought I'd build a compost maker to try to make best use of it. This, as ever, resulted in a lot of reading up on the subject (comfrey, that is), and a bit of experimentation with the bits and bats I had around – I never buy anything for these DIY jobs unless I'm forced to – and I ended up building two. Time will tell which one works the best, but they're both pretty simple, so you might try them both yourself if you've got the inclination and the bits.

SO, WHAT IS COMFREY?

Comfrey is a native British herb, initially just used medicinally. A strain from Russia was introduced into the UK (see **READING**) to try to improve on the native British variety for use as an animal fodder crop, and various crosses were made between varieties, resulting in a fodder type ('Bocking 4', a variety sadly since lost) and a fertiliser ('Bocking 14').

The variety sold now as seed is typically the original British plant, *Symphytum officinale*. 'Bocking 14' is a hybrid between *S. officinale* and *S. asperum* to create the aforementioned Russian comfrey, *S.* × *uplandicum*, which, as a sterile hybrid, can only be propagated as root cuttings or by splitting the plants.

Whichever variety you acquire, it's a very fine fertiliser plant that is really easy to grow, so it's bound to be useful to home farmers everywhere! It is tolerant of wet and shade, so can be grown where you don't grow vegetables, and seems to look after itself once it's established; I do like a useful plant that can be neglected.

Our own little patch established itself from a small tray of plants that got overgrown just outside the polytunnel (serendipity at work). As you can see (above), comfrey has small, pale-purple flowers and hairy stems, and the leaves are hairy too; these hairs can irritate your skin (although personally I haven't found that's the case), so gloves are recommended when stuffing it into your composter (the ones we're about to build… bear with me).

The big deal about the plant, for us vegetable gardeners, is that as it



grows, it draws in nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium, that's 'N' 'P' and 'K' respectively, and so much so that it contains more than most commercial feeds, and more importantly still, it's a vigorous perennial plant, giving us free fertiliser once it's well established.

The more I read about it, the more wonderful it seems. Get some seed or cuttings ordered *now*, then come back and read the rest of the article!

MAKING COMPOST

In early spring, the first cut can be used for fertilising spuds; you can simply cut it, let it wilt, and then lay it in the bottom of your potato trenches 1–2in deep. You can also make a liquid feed from it very simply, without any bits of paraphernalia, by cutting it up and sticking it in a covered bucket to let it rot down.

Seedaholic (see **READING**) recommends a covered container such as a water-butt, with 5kg of leaves to 90 litres of water (or in English, about 12lb of leaves in a 20-gallon water-butt – I prefer metric for weights and volumes, but imperial for measuring stuff… Yes, I know I'm inconsistent!). Put the leaves in the water-butt with a brick on top to squidge them down and then fill with water. Leave for 3–4 weeks, then dilute the resultant liquid at a ratio of about 10:1 or 15:1. The downside is it smells awful, so decanting the stuff into a bottle is not a pleasant task. Seedaholic suggests adding a tap to the water-butt, with a piece of hessian to stop the tap getting clogged.

Wikipedia, that infallible(!) source of knowledge, reckons that if it's made with water as above, it can be used neat, but one of them must be wrong… stacking the leaves dry in a container with a hole in the bottom is another way to get a concentrated liquid, the author(s) say, then dilute that to 15:1.

MY OWN COMPOST MAKERS

But enough of this conflicting advice, let's make our own compost makers and see what works. I made a free-standing, outdoor one that could be fixed to a wall if you have a handy one, and another that can sit inside, in the corner of a polytunnel or shed. This one will probably work more quickly, as it's warmer indoors: a chemical reaction, which this is, tends to speed up with heat.

GROWING AND CROPPING YOUR COMFREY



As I've said, it's so easy to grow that our patch was established pretty well by accident. If you want to put some love and care into it (and so you should), seeds should be sown from March to June in moist, well-drained, fertile soil, 1in deep and in rows 12in apart, then thinned out to 48in apart. Either that, or sow it in pots or trays in a greenhouse or polytunnel and plant out when well grown. Plant it out in a piece of ground that's been well weeded and manured for best results, and you can even use raw manure – it really doesn't mind.

Once established, crop it as below, and when you've finished and it's died back in late autumn, give it a coat of mulch or manure for the winter. It can be propagated as root cuttings – apparently very easily. Split the plants with a spade and plant root cuttings about 2in long.

Apparently I'd been doing it all wrong, in that it's supposed to be best harvested for green manure just before it flowers – when the flowers are in bud, I suppose, but it flowers all summer long, so that might be tricky! It's best cut to about 6in above ground level, which, luckily, I did, and can be cut several times during the year, starting in spring, and ending in September. I only cut mine once, in October, but then again, the year has been ridiculously mild. Once it gets into November it all dies back, only to leap out again in spring!

THE OUTDOOR COMPOSTER UNDER CONSTRUCTION



01 The base from below.



02 The base, right-side up, with the final front-to-back section attached.



03 The vertical plank.



04 The support.



05 The completed container stand.



06 Marking the container.



07 The fitted container complete with tap.



08 The grate fastened in place.



09 The finished composter.

THE OUTDOOR COMPOSTER

I made a stand out of a pallet and a plank, to support a length of 4in soil pipe. You need to be tall, so you can reach the top to put the chopped comfrey in! If you plant your comfrey near a building, forget the wooden stand and use the soil pipe brackets to hold the pipe to the wall – the rest is the same. I then found an old container with a lid to catch the liquid that the comfrey will turn into as it rots down, and fitted a tap to it for easy decanting.

The base is the heavy section stuff, about 3in × 2in, from a pallet – two lengths about 32in long, and three crosspieces about 2ft long, screwed and glued together. To get it square, adjust the timbers until both diagonals are the same length. I then screwed and glued another piece, 2in × 6in and 32in long, in the centre, front to back, to give the vertical piece that comes next something to stand on.

Next, a vertical plank 2in × 6in and about 5ft long was screwed and glued to the central crosspiece. It needs a support, so I made one from a piece of 2in × 1in wood, about 4ft long, cut at an angle, and then screwed and glued it.

The stand is simply to support a length of soil pipe about 4ft long into which we'll stuff chopped comfrey, but there'll be a container with a tap on it at the base, which needs to be raised up a bit or we can't get a jug under the tap. For the container stand I found three pieces of 4in × 1in and screwed them to the base. The container is just an old tile adhesive bucket, about 11in in diameter and 9in high. I drilled a hole near the base and screwed on a plastic water-butt tap (bought from Wickes for just a few pounds), then I cut a hole in the top (I marked it with a felt-tip pen and cut it out with a Stanley knife) for the soil pipe to push through.

To stop the comfrey simply dropping out of the bottom, I found a soil pipe socket and an old drain cover, which just fits snugly inside. You could simply fasten a piece of wire mesh over the pipe to save a few quid, but the beauty of the socket is: a) it's removable if it gets clogged; and b) the raised rim virtually seals against the hole in the container, which stops rain getting in.

Lastly, I fastened the pipe in place with a couple of soil pipe clamps. I stuck an old plastic container in the top to keep the rain out. I've filled it with comfrey three times now, so it must be rotting down pretty well.



THE INDOOR COMPOSTER

This one is simpler: a piece of 9in soil pipe, about 32in long, which was 'rescued' from a skip at the edge of dark. Stick an upturned plant pot into the bottom, duck tape them together and stand the result in a bucket, then fill with comfrey (see left), and that's about it! I guess the pong will tell me when it's ready. It should be diluted to about 15:1, and simply watered onto your plants.

Both composters will work with added nettles too.

STOP PRESS!

Readers, it works! The first 'comfrey tea' appeared about a month after the first fill.



JOHN'S TIP!

Remember to turn the tap 'off' when you build it...



Reading

- ***Comfrey: Past, Present and Future*** by L. D. Hills seems to be the definitive work. Hills followed up pioneering work by Henry Doubleday, who brought seed in from Russia and achieved massive yields – he wanted to use comfrey as a fodder crop. Hills had trial grounds in Bocking (in Essex), and experimented on various strains for both fodder and fertiliser. 'Bocking 14' was his best fertiliser variety.
- A country name for comfrey is 'knitbone', so unsurprisingly it can be used as an ointment on the skin to treat wounds, promote healing and reduce inflammation from sprains and broken bones (google 'Comfrey University of Maryland Medical Center'). It contains allantoin (a substance that helps new skin cells grow), plus other substances (they don't specify which!) that reduce inflammation. It *used* to be taken internally for stomach problems, but it's been found to contain various toxins that can cause liver damage. See also ***The Encyclopedia of Medicinal Plants*** published by Dorling Kindersley.
- The Seedaholic website is very informative, and they also sell seeds (I'd buy from them just because of the website!). Visit http://www.seedaholic.com/symphytum-officinale-comfrey.html to find out more.
- ***Wild Drugs*** by Zoe Hawes shows how to make comfrey into an 'infused oil' for sprains and the like.

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A WAY OF LIFE

A Smallholder's Diary

Dot Tyne's October **entries** include sorting out the **rams** and **ewes** for the breeding season while making **apple wine**, preparing for the **Welsh Winter Fair** and replacing an **ineffective ram**

1ST OCTOBER

Gathered in several groups of sheep and sorted out a few ewes to sell as culls. Did the paperwork, loaded up, and Tim took them to Bryncir market.

I took the little trailer and drove to Ruthin to collect two teaser rams – we need a couple more, as we've increased our ewe numbers a bit this year.

2ND OCTOBER

Put the teaser rams out with the ewes – they'll run with the flock until the breeding rams go in later this month.

Did some work in the garden: finished harvesting the sweetcorn – some of it has gone a bit over, but it's been a fine crop – and weeded the swedes.

Duck curry for dinner.

Baked bread, churned butter and made apple and cinnamon cakes.

3RD OCTOBER

Checked all the sheep and collected feed from the mill.

Looked through our list of ewes to decide which ones are to go to which rams. A bit of careful planning will be required to get the numbers right in each group, and to ensure that no ewe is mated by a ram that is too closely related.

4TH OCTOBER

Had a day out at the local rare breed and poultry sale. Didn't buy or sell anything, but enjoyed ourselves nonetheless.

Had a baking session this evening.

5TH OCTOBER

It was very windy.

Tim went to look at some ewes that a neighbour is selling to see if they would make a good addition to our flock, but he decided against buying them.

6TH OCTOBER

Took the last of our shearling rams to market and sold him for £250. Overall we are pretty pleased with the trade we've had on rams this year.

Had trouble with the tractor today, but Tim, much to his own surprise, managed to fix it all by himself – not bad for someone who hates doing anything with machinery.

The girls collected a bucketful of windfall apples from an old tree in the hedge. These are particularly small, so would be best used for wine or jelly – it would be a fiddle trying to peel and core them all.

7TH OCTOBER

Had another apple-collecting session; it's been a bumper crop this year – certainly more apples than I can reasonably use. Tim is looking into the possibility of getting them pressed for juice – there is a chap locally who makes cider, so he may be able to help us out with that.

Apple tart for pudding and also made apple flapjacks.

8TH OCTOBER

Gathered in all the ram lambs currently at home. Had a good sort through them: picked out a bunch to keep and rear on as rams for sale next year; another group that are ready to go for killing now; and the rest we'll keep to fatten. Need to sort through the remainder over the next few days.

Thunderstorms and power cuts this evening – churned the butter by candlelight while watching lightning flashing over the hills.







Remember!

Careful planning is required to ensure that no ewe is served by a ram that is too closely related.

9TH OCTOBER

One of the stock rams went wandering overnight, and Tim had a bit of a job getting him home again! Put him in the shed – he'll have to stay there now until he goes out with the ewes next week.

10TH OCTOBER

Brought the other two groups of ram lambs home and sorted through them as well. Put any worth keeping with those we selected a couple of days ago, and sorted the rest into fat, stores over 35kg, and lambs lighter than that. The smallest were put out on the field of forage rape that we planted in August.

Iestyn collected five North Country Cheviot ewe lambs from a nearby farm that he will prepare for the Young Farmers' classes at the Royal Welsh Winter Fair, which takes place at the beginning of December.

Baked bread and choc yum, and Rhian experimented with raspberry and white chocolate brownies!

11TH OCTOBER

Took Rhian to the shoot for a day's beating.

Prepared a double batch of apple wine from some of the fruit that I gathered up as windfalls a few days ago. Will leave them to ferment for a week before doing anything more with them.

Sorted out the fat lambs ready to go to the collection centre in the morning.

Made peanut butter cupcakes and hazelnut cookies.

13TH OCTOBER

What a day! We had a lot to get done, and we were held up by all sorts of things going wrong!

All the ewes were gathered, dosed for fluke, injected with a scab preventative, given a pour-on to deal with ticks and lice, and given a mineral drench. They were all marked with spray according to which rams they were to go to, and were then transported to the appropriate field for tupping.

Slowing us down were problems with the dosing guns, a puncture on the trailer and an unhelpful sheepdog. It got too dark to carry on, so we had to bring the rest of the ewes home to finish sorting them in the shed with the lights on. By the time we finished everything, and had milked the cows as well, it was the middle of the night – literally!

14TH OCTOBER

We were very tired after yesterday, but there's still quite a bit to do: finished putting the ewes where they needed to be for tupping (we didn't quite get them all moved yesterday!), and put raddle harnesses on the rams and took them out to their ewes.

15TH OCTOBER

Checked the sheep and cattle, but it was mostly paperwork today.

Baked bread, apple cakes, flapjacks, cookies and churned butter. It's good to have the cake tins full again.

Iestyn and Llinos went to a practice for the Young Farmers' Eisteddfod.

16TH OCTOBER

Tim went to get a batch of feed from the merchant's.

Picked out two pairs of ewe lambs to prepare for the Winter Fair. Brought them in and sorted out troughs for them. One of them seems rather reluctant to come for the feed, though. Hopefully, she'll get the hang of it soon or she won't gain weight at the same rate as the others.



18TH OCTOBER

I was out at a meeting all day, but the others weighed all the store lambs and the Winter Fair lambs too.

Moved the cattle around a bit to make the best use of the grass – put the heifer and her calf in a separate field from Bluebell and Buttercup to reduce pressure on the grazing.

19TH OCTOBER

Dealt with the wine, which has been fermenting for a week. Strained the apples out of the liquid and squeezed as much juice as possible out of them. Added sugar and poured into demijohns. This will now be left to its own devices until the fermentation slows right down. Bottled two gallons of last year's apple brew.

20TH OCTOBER

The ewes that we sponged and were tupped last month have come back into season. We are worried that there might be a problem with the ram. Brought













the group into the shed, caught the ram and took him to the vet for a semen test. The sample was completely blank, so we had to do some quick thinking: split the group of ewes up and redistributed them between the other rams, and put some with one of our best ram lambs. It's far from ideal, but in the circumstances there's not a lot else we can do. It does illustrate the benefits of using raddle harnesses, though!

Sorted through the apples to pull out those that have started to go bad – the pigs will eat those. Haven't had an opportunity yet to arrange to get the fruit pressed.

21ST OCTOBER

Tim took a trough up to the heifers on the mountain so we can start feeding them, as they're beginning to lose condition now. While he was there he spotted some ewes that we must have missed when we gathered the flock. He went back up there with Rhian after school to see if they could get them down, but they were too wild! We'll have another go in the morning.

22ND OCTOBER

We went round the mountain to see if we could gather the ewes, and they came down with no problems at all – must have been the wind yesterday that stirred them up! Sorted them out, gave them the same doses that the rest had had earlier in the month and put them out with the rams they were supposed to be with.

Picked the first Brussels sprouts and ate them with pheasant casserole with apple and celeriac.

23RD OCTOBER

Fed the heifers and checked the sheep.

A local sheepdog handler brought a young dog for Tim to try out – we could do with a youngster coming on.

Harvested the first leeks. The crop is a bit variable, but that's not a problem, as we'll just eat the big ones first and the rest will have grown by the time we want to lift them in the New Year.

24TH OCTOBER

Tim caught one of the rams when he was checking round, as he's a bit lame. Trimmed and sprayed his feet. Hopefully, it will improve now, and won't have affected his ability to serve the ewes.

Quite a bit of work going on in the extension at the moment – with luck we'll be able to start using the crog loft soon.





25TH OCTOBER

I was at the YFC Eisteddfod with Iestyn and Llinos. Iestyn won the Eisteddfod Chair (the top award for writing and poetry), and their club was third overall – pretty good considering that they are one of the smallest clubs in the region.

Rhian went beating with the shoot.

Tim weighed the store lambs and the Winter Fair lambs. Quite a few of the store lambs have lost weight, but this isn't unusual initially, as it can take them a while to get used to a new diet and environment.

27TH OCTOBER

Had a farmer here today who was interested in buying the heifers, but they were a bit smaller than he was looking for. Also showed him the Angus cross bull calves in the shed, and he was quite interested in them.

He offered us £350 each for them, which is probably about right.

29TH OCTOBER

Rhian took advantage of half-term to fit in an extra day's beating. She seems to be enjoying it and is not averse to having a few pennies in her pocket either!

Tim was mostly working in the extension today.

31ST OCTOBER

Fed the heifers and checked the sheep. Collected ten Hesston bales of hay, which we have bought from a neighbour. This gives us a good stock of fodder to start the winter.

Took Llinos to Conwy – she is going on an RSPB young person's conservation weekend. I really hope the weather won't be too awful, as she will be outside most of the time.

Iestyn is also away this weekend, so only Tim, Rhian and me are at home. Should be quiet then!

Fact!

'Eisteddfod' means a sitting (eistedd = to sit) – perhaps a reference to the hand-carved chair traditionally awarded to the best poet.

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HEN HINTS!

Avoiding the scams

Terry Beebe considers how to **source** the **best birds** for your needs, and how best to **avoid** the **scammers**

Many newcomers to chicken keeping make some serious mistakes when it comes to buying birds: choosing a suitable breed and buying good quality birds can be a problem if you are not careful. Here are some basic hints that will help prevent you making some common mistakes that could cost you money and time, and cause you heartache, too.

CHOOSING A BREED

Before buying any birds, you will need to consider exactly what might be the ideal type for your particular requirements. This may sound obvious, but many people give it little thought. For example, if you have limited space, a smaller breed is the best choice, and if you have lots of space, then larger breeds are an option. Ask yourself, too, if you want egg layers, table birds, dual-purpose birds or show birds – all of which will have distinctly different requirements.

There are also many commercial breeds (hybrids) created using pure-breed chickens to create spectacularly good egg producers, and even dual-purpose hybrids for both eggs and meat. Buying these is usually very simple and inexpensive, but if you fancy keeping pure-breeds things become a little more complicated, as most will not live up to the production levels of hybrids.

To choose a breed, look at the individual reports on roughly how many eggs they might produce each year, and also at their behaviour (are they flighty and hard to control?), and ask yourself are they a hardy breed that will cope with extreme weather conditions – an important point if you live in a more northerly location, but less so in the South East.

Take into account a bird's characteristics, too – crest, feathered legs and feet, or a large muff – because these are not ideal for outdoors, as they quickly become soiled and the bird will probably have problems with its feet, eyes, etc., especially when the weather is wet and damp. Fancy breeds are mainly kept for exhibition purposes and are often not good egg layers, and can also be high maintenance. I am not trying to put you off keeping such breeds, but be aware of the cost in time and effort to keep them in good condition.

SIGNS OF A GOOD LAYER

It is almost impossible to select a bird guaranteed to lay large quantities of eggs, but there are a few guidelines. They obviously need to be very healthy, and checking out the adult birds in a flock will give you an idea as to how the younger birds will eventually turn out. The size and brightness of the comb and wattles is usually a good pointer, as this is a sign of a hen with laying potential. Bright eyes, an alert disposition and good posture are also good signs, but a pale comb and wattles are to be avoided.

If choosing a pure-breed, select a breed with a history of good egg production; such breeds include Light Sussex, Rhode Island Red, Wyandotte, and many other similar breeds. Some, such as the Light Sussex, are also available as pure-breed commercial birds; although not as prolific as hybrids, they will still give you a good supply of eggs and meat, if required.







Below left: A hybrid Black Rock in excellent condition.

Below middle: Healthy young ISA Brown hybrids – probably the greatest layers of all.

Below right: Crested birds, or birds with feathered legs such as these Partridge Silkies, can be high maintenance.

SOCIAL MEDIA

The Internet is a minefield for potential new poultry keepers. It is amazing how many experts have appeared and are now giving advice – some that is certainly accurate and very helpful, but there are many giving incorrect or biased information, or just using social media sites to sell birds and eggs, many of which are of inferior quality. Many of the birds shown do not actually belong to the sellers, and the images have been downloaded from other sites, with the seller often having no birds close to the quality on offer.

First, carry out your research and decide which breed you would like to keep, then contact the relevant breed club (all listings are on The Poultry Club website: www.poultryclub.org) and ask for help and information.

Then contact a reputable breeder, who will usually be proud to show you all the awards they have won, and will spend a little time talking with you about the breed. And be prepared to pay a little extra to get birds that you will be proud to own, and hopefully show and win with in time.



"THE SIZE AND BRIGHTNESS OF THE COMB AND WATTLES IS USUALLY A GOOD POINTER, AS THIS IS A SIGN OF A HEN WITH LAYING POTENTIAL"

A white Leghorn hen, with large comb showing red, good posture and alert eyes. This is a healthy bird and will most likely be an excellent layer.







Above left: A Light Sussex.

Above middle: Although a nice bird, this Cream Legbar is not yet ready for laying – note the pale head and comb.

Above right: Note the pale combs and spurs on the legs, showing that these are most likely old birds, which should be avoided.

The main point to take into account is always that the birds must be healthy and showing no signs of disease. If you are new to chicken keeping, take a friend along who has experience in these matters when visiting a breeder. If a visit is discouraged, then look elsewhere.

GOOD BREEDING BIRDS

When looking for good breeding stock, ensure that the birds are true to the breed standard and meet the requirements needed to achieve that standard.
For example, a good pure-breed Rhode Island Red has a plumage that holds its feather colour right through the feather to the skin. If this is not the case, then the bird is not up to the breed standard and should not be used for breeding.
Of course, this is just one basic example – check with the breed standard to describe the full requirements for each breed.

Other basic faults can be simple but overlooked by a novice, such as a bird that has white markings in its feathers where there should be no white.
Such faults will be repeated in the offspring, so steer clear unless you simply want birds for your garden.
The genetics involved in successful breeding today are very complex and time-consuming, but if you use only good quality birds you should achieve at least reasonable success.

GOOD EXHIBITION BIRDS

Any birds suitable for exhibiting must be to the standard specified in The Poultry Club's *British Poultry Standards* book. If you are not certain of the required standard, then you need to check this out. You can buy or borrow the book, check the details online at www.poultryclub.org, or contact the appropriate breed club, which will be happy to supply you with the information you need. They will be keen to welcome a potential new member and can usually put you in touch with a reputable breeder who could supply you with the quality birds you require. Buying good quality birds to start with may be more expensive, but you should get good results quite quickly. Remember that good quality breeding is not done on the cheap!

GOOD TABLE BIRDS

Today, table (or meat) birds are mostly hybrid commercial breeds commonly known as cobs. They are quick-growing birds that are bred specially for the purpose and can be reared and ready for eating in just five to seven weeks. Other hybrids will usually take around fourteen weeks to reach such a level of growth.

Pure-breeds can also be used as table birds, but they will mature at a much slower rate. However, many poultry keepers believe this slower maturation process produces a better end result with regards to taste and texture.
Corn-reared birds and free-range birds are especially sought after, as these are generally reared naturally, and this is better for the birds' welfare and quality of life, too.

HOW TO AVOID BEING TAKEN FOR A RIDE

Shady dealers are all too common in today's poultry market, especially in the more expensive exhibition, breeding and exotic sector. Be very careful, because there are many people selling birds that are of inferior quality, which carry disease and show signs of problems, yet they are still often sold with little consideration for the buyer.

Many ads describe birds as being bred from show-winning stock, but what you really need to see are the trophies and documented proof of this. Exhibitors who are genuinely showing and winning, actually sell very few birds, and when they do sell they do not usually need to advertise. You will most likely have to pay more to get the best,





Far left: A good pure-breed Rhode Island Red will have a plumage that holds its feather colour right through the feather to the skin.

Left: The Poland is a very popular exhibition bird.

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Above left: This bird is clearly ill, but any bird which looks sleepy, uninterested and hunched up will most likely give you problems.

Above middle: This auction at Oswestry has been running for many years, is beyond reproach, and is a great place for any experienced keepers to source birds.

but always make sure you are on the lookout for the scam merchants.

There are the rare occasions when a long-standing fancier retires or dies, and then there is the chance of some really good stock coming onto the market, but in most cases the best will already have been picked out, and what is left can often be second best. However, if you can get the right bloodline and breed from it, it is likely you will find yourself the owner of a really top quality bird.

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY

It is almost impossible to know whether the seller is good or bad, but to protect yourself check the breeder's background. Are they a club member? Have they exhibited for long? How are their birds kept, and are they all in good condition? Ask lots of questions, and make sure you get satisfactory answers. If you are unsure, do not commit yourself. Instead, check that everything is genuine, and if everything checks out, go back and buy the birds you require. An honest breeder will not be offended, but a scammer probably will!

I would suggest you avoid auctions unless you have the knowledge to assess the birds in the pens (or a friend who can do so). One way of checking a breeder's credentials is to look at the number of breeds for sale under their name – if there is a very wide variety, then they are possibly just buying them in to resell. On the other hand, if they are only selling a limited number, and mostly of the same breed, there is a good chance that they are genuine. There are, however, always exceptions to this rule.

Dealers who sell birds just for profit do so solely as a business, and this usually means that quality can be compromised by profit motive, so be wary, check out all the options and don't buy the very first birds you see. Also, just because birds are expensive does not mean they are the best. A genuine breeder may well be offering quality birds at a lower price than a scammer!

AVOIDING THE SCAMS

There are dozens of scams taking place all the time, with false claims being made about birds being pure-bred when in fact they are cross-bred, and incorrect sexing of chicks, with people buying several chicks at auction described as hens which all turn out to be cockerels! These are both very common scams. The purchase of hatching eggs is another popular scam, with people buying eggs described as fertile, but they turn out to be supermarket eggs, and not the fertile pure-breds they were described as. A claim that eggs belong to a certain breed or bloodline is also another common con, as when they hatch – if indeed they do hatch – you could end up with a cross-bred, at which point there is really very little you can do.

Many Internet sites, including eBay, are full of tempting offers of fertile eggs from top show winners, but I can guarantee that breeders who possess all these show winners will be very reluctant to sell you fertile eggs for hatching. It is common sense that if you have the best you do not give them away and allow someone else to buy into your many years of breeding for a couple of quid on a website. Consider, too, that many eggs are destroyed in transit – the post is usually not overly kind to eggs, and many arrive ready scrambled.

So, be wary of auctions and adverts claiming that birds are from a certain bloodline, and watch out, too, for images of birds used on Internet sites which may have been downloaded from elsewhere – this has happened to me on several occasions, so I know first-hand that it does go on. If in doubt, ask someone you know who has experience in these matters to help you make the right selection and to give you the right advice. There are hundreds of experienced and honest poultry keepers out there, many of whom will be only too pleased to help and get you on the right track.







The SUSSEX FOWL

Each month **Terry Beebe** will be taking a look at **British poultry breeds**, beginning this month with the **Sussex fowl**

The Sussex fowl is an ancient British breed, which dates back to 1845 (when it was known as the 'Kent' fowl). The original variety was the Speckled Sussex, with a very attractive tri-coloured pattern consisting of a dark-brown body with black-and-white-tipped feathers. Other varieties include the Buff (a gingery coloured body with black neck hackles, flights, and tail), the Light (a white body with black neck hackles, flights, and tail), the Silver (black with silver lacing to the feathers), the Red (similar to a Rhode Island Red, but with more pronounced black in the neck, wings and tail), the Brown (the same colouring as a Red Dorking/Welsummer), and the recently standardised 'Coronation' Sussex (a blue version of the Light Sussex with all the black parts altered to blue).

The Light Sussex has always been the most popular Sussex variety and is very attractive, particularly when viewed on the range. Good specimens with the correct size, meat-to-bone ratio, shape, markings and all-round general conformation are now difficult to come by, although there are lots of OK specimens out there; once you have observed top quality stock, it is very difficult to settle for anything less.

There are many different forms of Light Sussex in the UK. Starting at the top there are the exhibition specimens with their wonderful rectangular 'brick shape' and superb markings, and below them are the average specimens which don't quite cut it in the show pen, but aren't necessarily brilliant layers either. Next we have strains which look very similar to these pure-breed birds, but are selected for their 'utility' attributes – such bloodlines can be difficult to locate nowadays. At the bottom is the Sussex Star, a recently developed hybrid based on the Light Sussex, which generally has poor body size and markings, with its only saving grace being an ability to produce good egg numbers. However, such specimens should not be regarded as Light Sussex, and nor should they be crossed into existing lines.

Below: Pure bred commercial Sussex chickens.

The Sussex breed certainly has a good following and boasts one of the oldest breed clubs in the UK. The colour varieties come in and out of fashion, but are supported by a handful of dedicated breeders. Fashions come and go, but the Light Sussex will, in my view, always epitomise the breed and will probably remain the most popular Sussex colour.

THE SUSSEX HYBRID

Hybrid chickens are produced by professional hatcheries from specially selected pure-breeds designed to produce a hen that will lay all year round, and that will be strong and healthy. The Sussex hybrid comes with different names, dependent on the breeder, and although quite similar to pure-breed birds, they are created solely as egg producers. Sometimes referred to as 'pied', they are usually friendly and are a good layer of 240 (or more) light-brown eggs each year. If you are looking to buy pure-breed birds, then beware – the similarity between the pure-breed birds and hybrids has on many occasions been exploited to the disadvantage of novice keepers!







POLLINATORS

their secret life

Claire Waring continues her **investigation** into nature's other **pollinators** with a look at the **life cycle** of **bumblebees** and **wasps**

Having looked last month at the diversity of pollinators other than honeybees, let's now take a look at their diverse and fascinating life cycles.

PERPETUAL SURVIVAL

In theory, a honeybee colony can live for ever. As the queen reaches the end of her life, the colony has the means to replace her by raising new virgin queens. One of these will mate successfully, return to the nest and head the colony. Each year the queen will lay sufficient eggs to maintain the colony strength so that there are enough foragers to fly out and bring back adequate amounts of nectar and pollen to feed the brood and store for the colony's supplies over winter. Without any disasters, like disease or starvation, this system is as near perpetual as you can get. However, we know that nature doesn't quite work that way and colonies do die for one reason or another.

Looking at our other pollinators, none actually overwinter as colonies. They adopt other strategies, ranging from one mated female hibernating, to eggs, larvae or pupae sitting out the cold.

THE ANNUAL LIFE CYCLE

This month we are looking at bumblebees and wasps. When I worked for The British Beekeepers' Association (BBKA), we would get calls from members of the public who had problems with bees. Sometimes these were about a swarm which had landed in the garden to regroup before flying off to its new nest site. These we passed to a local bee-keeper who could go and collect the bees.

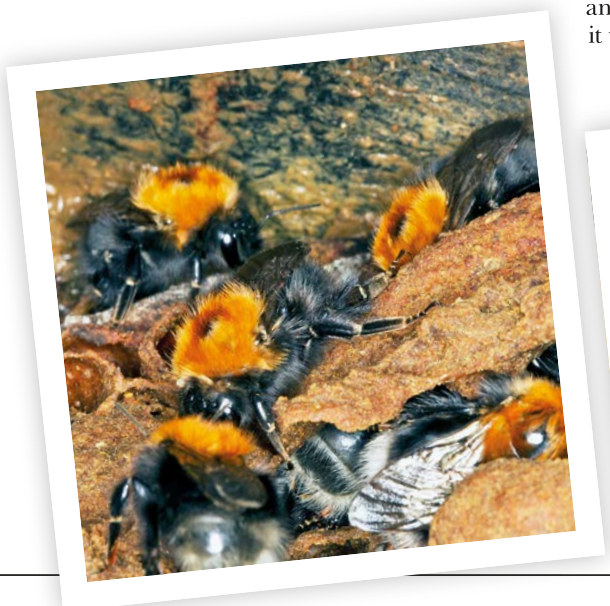
However, by far the majority were about bumblebees. The caller had just become aware of a (bumblebee) nest in the compost heap, at the bottom of a hedge, in the rockery or under the shed. Very often the call was accompanied by the phrase, "…and I've got children (or a dog or other pet)". I am intrigued that bumblebees somehow change from being friendly and cuddly when we are children – just consider the number of bee cuddly toys that are available – to "those horrid things that sting, which you have to avoid or kill". I often wonder what causes this switch in attitude, but that is not for discussion here.

Although people are now vastly more aware of bees, thanks largely to the recent media coverage, I found that few actually understood how a bumblebee colony works. Having established we were in fact talking about bumblebees, I would explain the life cycle. As with anything circular, it is always difficult to know where to begin, but let's start with the spring.

THE BUMBLEBEE

Spring is the time when a mated bumblebee queen emerges from hibernation and, having built up her energy reserves by feeding on nectar, starts to look for a suitable nest site. Queens are generally large insects and are quite audible in flight. In fact, you often hear them before you see them. Different species are active at different periods over the spring and summer, so if you have a patch of wild flowers, you will see numbers increasing and then declining as time goes on.

The queen is looking for a suitable cavity. This might be in the earth, under a shed, or in a bird box or old mouse nest where the bedding has not been cleared out. I've even been called to a nest in the fibreglass insulation of the flat roof on a house extension. The queen first secretes wax from glands under her abdomen and then uses it to make a honey pot, which she fills with regurgitated nectar. She collects pollen in her pollen baskets (like a honeybee), and forms this into a ball, moistening it with nectar and saliva, which help





Right: A Bombus hypnorum *nest showing the wax envelope over the brood cells.*

Far right: When a Bombus hypnorum *queen decided to make her nest in one of our nucleus boxes, it gave a good opportunity to observe the colony. This shows the cocoons of the developing workers, together with the wax envelope over the nest.*



Note!

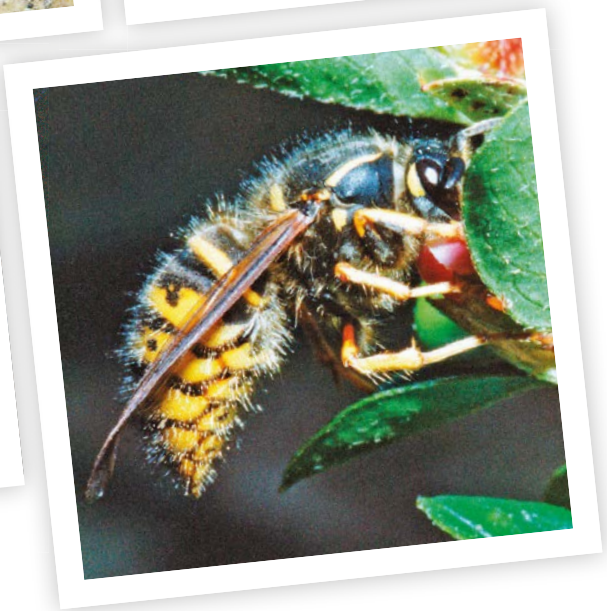
Although people are now vastly more aware of bees, thanks to the recent media coverage, few actually understand how a bumblebee colony works.

"SPRING IS THE TIME WHEN A MATED BUMBLEBEE QUEEN EMERGES FROM HIBERNATION AND, HAVING BUILT UP HER ENERGY RESERVES BY FEEDING ON NECTAR, STARTS TO LOOK FOR A SUITABLE NEST SITE"









Right: When the new adults have emerged from their cocoons, they are used as nectar storage pots.

Far right: Pollen is brought back to the nest and stored in elongated wax pollen pots, seen here in the foreground. One contains white pollen.

Below right: After new males and females have been raised and left the nest, the structure breaks down and the resident workers die. Wax moths move in and the nest is destroyed.

to stop spoilage. Some she eats herself, and this stimulates her ovaries. She lays fertilised eggs on the pollen clump and covers them with wax. She incubates the brood by lying on top of the clump, which is positioned close to the nectar pot, enabling her to feed easily. In due course the larvae spin individual cocoons, pupate and then emerge as adult female workers.

At this stage the queen remains in the nest and the new workers go out foraging. A new pollen clump is formed on top of the empty cells and the cycle begins again, with workers also helping with brood rearing. Old cells are employed as additional honey pots and special cells may be constructed for extra pollen storage.

When the colony reaches a size specific to the species, brood production switches to rearing new queens and males. The queens spend time foraging on nectar and pollen, building up their fat reserves for their hibernation period. Males leave the nest after a few days and search for a mate. Mated queens then search for a suitable hibernation site, often digging down into loose soil and forming a small chamber in which they remain until the spring, when the cycle starts all over again.

After the males and queens have left the nest it then degenerates and dies out.

When this was explained to the caller, it was gratifying that the vast majority said they would leave the nest alone and sort out the situation once it had died out. As for the children and pets, I just advised them to keep them away and to stop them poking the bees. Bumblebees are not prone to aggression unless provoked. Hopefully, many of the children were encouraged to watch from a safe distance and became fascinated.

“THEY [WASPS] DON’T SECRETE WAX, SO THEY MATERIAL FROM WHICH TO MAKE THEIR NESTS.

APIARY CHORES FOR JANUARY

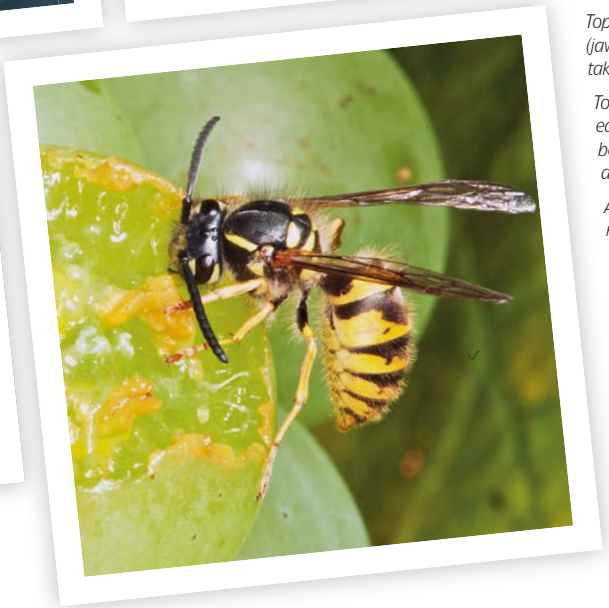
- Check the hives every few weeks to make sure things are OK, especially after any really bad weather.
- Replace any roofs that are leaking.
- Make sure hives are protected from woodpeckers by using small-mesh chicken wire or flaps cut from plastic sacks if these birds are a nuisance in your area.
- Make sure entrances are not blocked inside by dead bees. Clear them so that the occupants can fly out on a fine day to defecate.
- Heft the hives to check the level of stores, and feed candy if necessary.
- If you are using oxalic acid to treat for varroa, complete this early in the month.
- The winter is also an ideal time to check equipment that is out of use. Make sure it is in good order and ready for the active season, which will be on us before you know it!











Top far left: Wasps use their strong mandibles (jaws) to chew off pieces of rotten wood to take back to the nest.

Top middle: A typical wasps' nest in its early stages. The construction layers can be seen, together with the narrow entrance at the bottom.

Above: Wasps at the entrance to their nest. The papier mâché construction can clearly be seen.

Far left: Wasps will forage for nectar from flowers, such as this rosebay willowherb.

Left: When the adult wasp population reaches its maximum, workers will seek sugary substances from any available source.

Far left (previous page): In spring, mated queen wasps which have overwintered, feed on nectar to build up their energy levels before looking for a suitable nest site.



HAVE TO FIND ANOTHER MALLEABLE THIS IS WOOD PULP OR PAPIER MÂCHÉ"

WASPS

Wasps have a similar life cycle to bumblebees. They don't secrete wax, so they have to find another malleable material from which to make their nests. This is wood pulp or papier mâché. If you look closely at your (unpainted) fence, gate or any other piece of wood, you may well find vertical marks a few centimetres long. If you have the time, watch and wait and you may see a wasp collecting the raw material for its nest. The adult uses its mandibles (jaws) to scrape off wood fibres, which it collects under its 'chin'. It then grabs the load in its mandibles to carry back to the nest; other species collect rotten wood. Back at the nest the wood is chewed and moistened with saliva until it is mushy and can be formed into cells, surrounded by a papier mâché envelope.

Wasps use hexagonal cells (like the honeybee). Indeed, this shape allows for the greatest number of cells per unit area and is the most economical use of the material required for construction. However, I always feel sorry for wasp larvae: whereas honeybees build their cells on either side of a vertical midrib, with the axis sloping down slightly, wasp cells are built in horizontal layers – with the opening facing downwards! The larva hangs head down, and it is thought a viscous adhesive fluid keeps it in place. If it falls out, adults cannot reattach it and it is removed from the nest. Additional horizontal layers are suspended from previous ones on posts, similar to an inverted wedding cake. Adults catch insects, which are masticated before being fed to the larvae, along with nectar. When stimulated, the larva produces sugary saliva as a 'reward' for the adult.

If you have become as fascinated as I have by these insects, I recommend *Bumblebees: Behaviour and Ecology* by Dave Goulson (Oxford University Press, 2nd edition, 2010), *Bumblebees* by Ted Benton (Collins New Naturalist Series, 2006), and *Social Wasps: Their Biology and Control* by Robin Edwards (The Rentokil Library, 1980). The last two are out of print, but can be found second-hand. Ted Benton's book is available through Print on Demand at www.newnaturalists.com/category/Print+on+Demand/Main+Series. There is also information about bumblebees available from the Bumblebee Conservation Trust (www.bumblebeeconservation.org).

NEXT MONTH

We shall turn our attention to solitary bees and other pollinators such as butterflies and moths.

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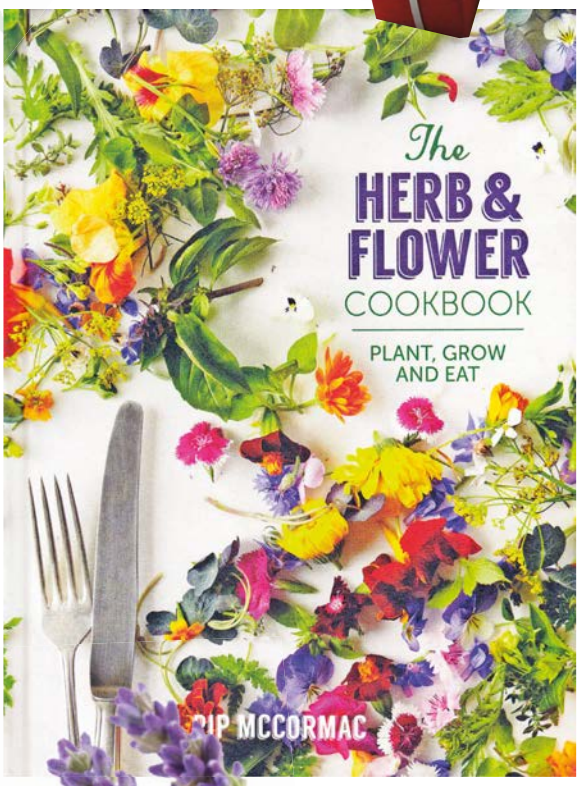


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LUNGWORM

The enemy in your garden

Dogs are **curious** to find whatever is hiding in the grass, but it could **end** in **tragedy**, as **lungworm** is on the increase. **Heidi M. Sands** investigates

Angiostrongylus vasorum is a parasite. Sometimes known as French heartworm, but more usually as lungworm, it's on the increase. If you are one of the UK's many dog owners, then it's definitely something you need to be aware of.

Each year many thousands of dogs become affected by lungworm: it destroys their health and it can kill; yet it's easily prevented and can also be treated effectively by modern veterinary treatments. So, where does it come from, how does it manifest itself, and most importantly, how can we stop it affecting our dogs?

A. vasorum is carried by common garden slugs and snails. Dogs, and in particular younger dogs and puppies, are generally inquisitive creatures and will seek out, play with and sometimes eat anything small that moves. Slugs and snails fall into this category, and unwittingly many dogs ingest lungworm in this way. Frogs may also be part of the scenario, but they are slightly less of a risk to dogs, as most will shy away from eating them.

However, it's not only deliberate ingesting that can lead to a lungworm infection in a dog. Lungworm can also be picked up accidentally from slugs in food and water bowls, on dog toys and in mouthfuls of grass plucked and eaten from gardens, roadsides, grass verges and elsewhere. Dense undergrowth is perfect for slugs, and dog owners need to take care when out walking dogs in the countryside; after all, your dog's life may even depend on it!

THE LUNGWORM LIFE CYCLE



Adult lungworms lodge themselves in the heart and pulmonary arteries of an affected dog. Once these worms lay eggs, they then hatch into larvae, which in turn pass into the lungs. The larvae are then coughed up by the dog, swallowed and eventually pass out of the dog in its faeces. From there the larvae are swallowed once again, this time by any passing slugs or snails, which in turn reinfect any dog that eats them. With slugs and snails being one of the most common inhabitants of our gardens, it's not difficult to see just how they can become the enemy.

One more thing to realise is that foxes, both town foxes and those found in the countryside, are natural hosts for lungworm and can also spread the disease. Any foxes that visit your garden to forage for food may unwittingly leave behind lungworm-infected faeces. It therefore becomes very important to limit the spread of lungworm from faeces by picking up dog or fox excrement from your garden.

That lungworm is on the increase is not in doubt. It used to be an infection found mostly in the south of England, Wales or Ireland; however, all that's now changed, and affected dogs are being seen in most parts of the UK, including the more northerly areas. It is now thought that influences, including changes in our climate, possibly affecting slug and snail populations, and the increased movement of dogs around the UK, are all aiding the spread of the disease. There may also be other factors at work too, but the experts generally agree that it is something that all dog owners need to be on the lookout for.

Initial signs of lungworm may be slight and can often go unnoticed, but as things progress and more damage is done to an affected dog, owners may notice a cough, where the dog seems to find it difficult to clear its throat. You may also notice an inability to exercise easily or to excess, or a tiredness not noted previously, and often not in keeping with the amount of exercise being done by the dog. As the disease progresses, excessive bleeding from cuts or wounds may be seen, and nosebleeds can occur, as too can bleeding into the eyes. Pale gums may also indicate anaemia due to lungworm damage at this stage, as may vomiting, diarrhoea, weight loss, a lack of appetite, unexplained changes in behaviour, fits or pain. In short, it's safe to say that if your dog exhibits *any* of the above symptoms, a trip to the vet is certainly the safest bet. Be aware, though, that symptoms can often be vague, certainly at the early stages, or can be confused with other conditions, but a delay in appropriate treatment can cause further damage to an affected dog. In extreme cases dogs have been known to die from lungworm.

In the early stages treatment is both relatively easy and effective, and prevention is definitely better than cure. With the current high levels of lungworm



"LUNGWORM CAN ALSO BE PICKED UP ACCIDENTALLY FROM SLUGS IN FOOD AND WATER BOWLS..."









Above: Dense undergrowth is perfect for slugs.

Right: Clean your dog bowls regularly!

infection, any dog – young or old and of any breed – that is regularly known to be eating slugs or snails, either deliberately or accidentally, can be put on a preventative treatment plan by a vet. It's simple and it really does work. Heavy lungworm infestations in the later stages may, however, require rather more in the way of veterinary intervention, including supportive treatment for any damage already done. Ignoring this parasitic condition is *not* an option.

Thankfully, dog-to-dog contact does not cause lungworm, although in areas where several dogs congregate such as parks, communal dog walks, kennel situations and where dogs are working together, there is an increased chance of them picking up lungworm. The obvious way in which to minimise this is to pick up after your dog and encourage other owners to do the same. It will not eradicate the risk, but it may well lessen it.

Removing slugs, snails and frogs from your garden in a dog-friendly way, without chemicals that may in turn harm a dog, could also be considered. Slug traps could reduce the threat of lungworm and are easy enough to make with a cut-off plastic bottle baited with beer and sunk into the ground. Ready-made slug traps are also available. Fencing gardens and dog-walking areas off from possible access by foxes might also be considered, as too could keeping dogs on leads when out walking in the countryside. Working dogs – those whose job it is to work away from owners – such as gun dogs and sheepdogs, are at increased risk of lungworm infection and should have particular attention paid to their health in this respect.

It's worth noting, too, that not all slugs and snails carry the parasite responsible for lungworm in dogs, but it pays to be on the alert all the same.

Beware!

Each year thousands of dogs are affected by lungworm: it destroys their health and it can kill, but it's easily prevented.

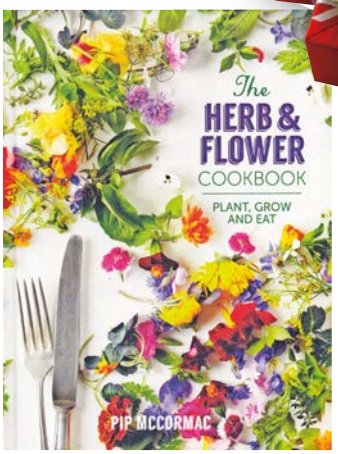
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"THIS RECIPE IS A QUICK-AND-EASY SUPPER DISH, WHICH IS GREAT FOR USING UP THE COOKED LEFTOVERS"

FOR THE SAUCE

55g butter
55g plain flour
600ml milk
1 tbsp Colman's English mustard
Salt and pepper (to taste)

METHOD

1. To make the sauce, melt the butter in a heavy-based saucepan over a low heat until melted but not boiling. Remove from the heat and beat in the flour, gradually pouring in the milk, whisking continuously.
2. Return to the heat and bring to the boil, still whisking, then reduce the heat and simmer the sauce gently for 5 minutes while stirring occasionally.
3. Stir in the mustard and add salt and pepper to taste, then remove from the heat and leave to chill until ready to use.
4. Fry the peppers and onions in the oil in a frying pan over a low- to medium-heat for 6–8 minutes until they begin to soften and lightly colour.
5. Add the cooked, sliced turkey and stir whilst heating through. It should cook for a further 5 minutes.
6. Whisk the mustard sauce before adding it to the turkey and vegetables, then gently simmer for 2 minutes, stirring well, until everything is well mixed and cooked through.
7. If using the gnocchi, bring a large pan of water to the boil and add the gnocchi. Cook them for 2 minutes if fresh, or 3–5 minutes if dried, until all have risen to the surface.
8. Drain and add them to the turkey dish, mixing them in well, then serve immediately.

This is great with rice or pasta, or it can be a tasty topping for a baked potato.

LIZZIEB'S TIP!

You can also make this recipe at any time of year with leftover chicken or pork!

NORFOLK TREACLE TART

This is a real heritage recipe from the region, dating back to the 1600s, and was supposedly a real favourite of Charles Dickens. Unlike modern treacle tarts, which are made with golden syrup and breadcrumbs, a Norfolk treacle tart was traditionally made with black treacle and eggs to create the custard-based filling. This recipe follows a traditional 17th-century method; however, I have adapted the recipe to add some golden syrup to give it a modern twist and to cut through the intense and slightly bitter traditional flavour.

INGREDIENTS
FOR THE PASTRY

250g plain flour
50g icing sugar
125g unsalted butter, cubed
1 egg, beaten
1 tbsp milk

FOR THE FILLING

3 tbsp black treacle
1 tbsp golden syrup
The juice and zest of 1 unwaxed lemon
12g unsalted butter
2 eggs, beaten
120ml double cream
Icing sugar (for dusting)

METHOD

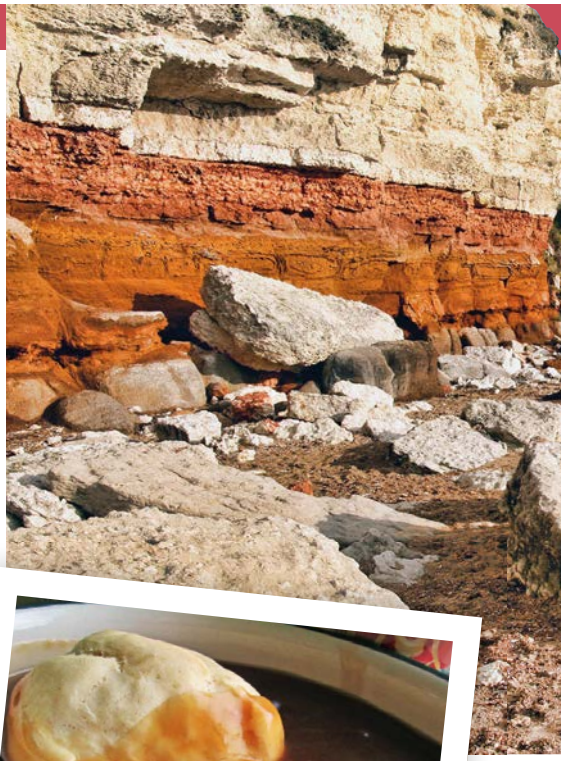
1 To make the pastry, sieve the flour and icing sugar into a large mixing bowl.
2 Add the cubes of butter and gently rub them into the sugar and flour until the mixture resembles breadcrumbs.
3 Make a well in the middle, add the egg and milk and gently mix together using your hands until it forms a ball of dough. Try not to overwork the pastry to keep it short and crunchy later.
4 Tip out the dough onto a clean, lightly floured work surface and gently pat it until it becomes a smooth round 5cm thick, then wrap it in cling film and place in the fridge for at least 40 minutes.
5 Roll out the chilled pastry on a lightly floured surface until it is about 1cm wider than both the base and the sides of the baking tin (a greased 23cm flan tin), and approximately 0.5cm thick.
6 Place the pastry in the flan tin, pressing down all around the edges and up the sides, then trim off any excess, prick the base with a fork and return to the fridge for at least 20 minutes.
7 Preheat the oven to 180°C, remove the pastry from the fridge and blind bake in the oven for 10 minutes.
8 Remove the lining or beans and return to the oven for a further 8–10 minutes until firm, then leave to cool before adding the filling.
9 To make the filling, melt the butter, black treacle and golden syrup in a heavy-based pan, then remove from the heat and leave to cool for 2 minutes.
10 Beat the eggs well until light and fluffy, then pour in the cream and stir gently to keep the eggs aerated.
11 Add the juice and zest of the lemon to the slightly cooled treacle and stir well to mix.
12 Fold in the cream mixture and pour into the prepared pastry case.
13 Place the filled tart in the oven for 15–20 minutes until the pastry is golden and the filling has set but still has a slight wobble!
14 Remove from the oven, dust with icing sugar and serve immediately.

It is best served warm with either a sweetened double cream or a good quality vanilla ice cream.



LIZZIEB'S TIP!

If you make up double the amount of pastry you can pop the extra (double-wrapped in cling film) into the freezer for use in future recipes. It will keep for about 2 months.





NORFOLK DUMPLINGS

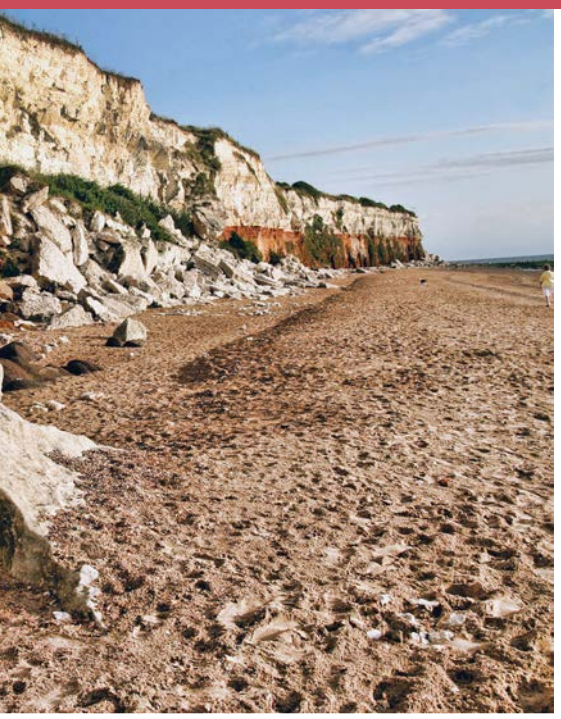
A heritage dish originally made and eaten by peasants, Norfolk dumplings were traditionally served in place of meat along with a bowl of gravy. Unlike other British dumplings, Norfolk dumplings were made with yeast rather than suet and were also known as 'floaters', as the yeast caused them to float during the cooking process. Traditionally, once boiled they were ready to serve; however, I have once again added a modern twist by finishing the dumplings in the oven to give them a crisper texture – almost like a bagel.

INGREDIENTS

225g plain flour
½ tsp salt
7g sachet dried yeast
½ tsp caster sugar
75ml warm water
1 tbsp milk (at room temperature)

METHOD

1 Place the yeast and sugar in a small bowl or cup and add 30ml of the warm water. Stir well until the yeast has dissolved, then cover and leave for about 10 minutes until risen and frothy.



2 Put the sieved flour and salt in a large bowl, make a well in the middle and add the yeast mixture together with the remaining water and the milk. Stir well with your hands to bring the mixture together to form a dough.
3 Tip out onto a lightly floured surface and knead well for about 10 minutes, then form into a ball and place in a covered bowl in a warm place to prove for at least 1 hour, ideally until it has doubled in size.
4 Flour the work surface, tip out the dough again and knock it back, then knead until shiny and smooth, and not sticky – you may well need to add a little extra flour whilst kneading.
5 Divide the dough into 8 portions and form into small balls. Place them on a lightly greased baking tray and leave to rise for a further 30 minutes.
6 Bring a large pan of water to the boil and add the dumplings, keeping the heat high. Cover with a lid and boil for 20 minutes.
7 Use a slotted spoon to remove the dumplings to a cake rack, then pat dry with kitchen roll. Place on a greased baking sheet and cook in a preheated oven at 200°C for 10 minutes until crisp and golden.

Serve hot, either as a side dish with a casserole or with a rich, meaty gravy.

LIZZIEB'S TIP!

Like traditional dumplings, you can flavour these to go with your main dish by adding, for example, a handful of chopped fresh parsley or a teaspoon of dried herbs.

CROMER CRAB CAKES WITH A RATATOUILLE-STYLE SALSA

Norfolk is well known for its bountiful coastline, and in particular for its shellfish. The Cromer crab, specifically, is one of the best-known Norfolk delicacies. Renowned for its high proportion of white meat to brown meat and its sweet, tender flavour, the Cromer crab's popularity has grown immensely; once only a summer catch, they are now harvested all year round.



INGREDIENTS FOR THE CRAB CAKES

300g Cromer crab (the prepared white meat)
300g floury potatoes, peeled and diced
1 red chilli, deseeded and chopped (optional)
Salt and pepper (to taste)
40ml double cream
A knob of butter

FOR THE SALSA

2 courgettes, diced into 1cm cubes
1 aubergine, diced into 1cm cubes
2 red onions, diced into 1cm cubes
Olive oil (for basting)
Cherry tomatoes, halved
Fresh mint, chopped
Olive oil
White wine vinegar
¼ tsp sugar
Salt and pepper (to taste)

METHOD

1 To make the crab cakes, add the potatoes to a pan of lightly salted boiling water and cook until soft.
2 Remove from the heat and strain well. Return the potatoes to the pan, add the double cream and butter, then mash until smooth. Leave to cool.
3 Once chilled, add the flaked crabmeat and the chilli, then season to taste and mix well.
4 Using lightly floured hands, form patties with the mixture and transfer to a greased baking tray. (If cooking later, store in the fridge until ready to cook.)
5 Preheat the oven to 200°C and cook the crab cakes for about 30 minutes until crisp and cooked throughout. Serve straight from the oven with the salsa.
6 To make the salsa, put the courgettes, aubergine and onions into a small sandwich-sized plastic bag, then add the oil and shake the bag to coat the vegetables.
7 Transfer to a baking tin and place in a hot oven for 20–25 minutes to roast.
8 Once cooked, remove the vegetables from the oven and transfer to a large bowl to cool completely.
9 Once cool, add the tomatoes and chopped mint and stir.
10 To make the dressing, whisk together the olive oil, white wine vinegar, sugar and seasoning, then pour over the salsa.

Store chilled in the fridge until ready to serve.

LIZZIEB'S TIP!

The perfect summer accompaniment to these delicious crab cakes has to be marsh samphire, and lucky summer visitors to Norfolk can pick their own, which grows in the salt-marshes along the coast.

NEXT MONTH

Lizzie will be in the West Midlands, the home of curry and chocolate.



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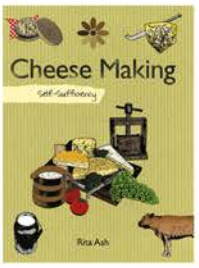
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MARMALADE Awards 2015

Marmalade makers of the world unite. The **10th Dalemain Awards and Festival** is looming and the **deadline** for entries is **15th February 2015**. Here is a brief **taster** of the event and an **application form** – so go on, get making!

The Awards and Festival will be held on Saturday 28th February and Sunday 1st March 2015 from 10am to 4pm (both days) at Dalemain Mansion and Historic Gardens, near Penrith in Cumbria. If you feel you have a winning marmalade, why not throw a jar of it into the ring (not literally, of course) and enter it into the Amateur Category. Not only could you get to meet Paddington Bear, you will also be raising money for good causes too, with *all* entry fees going to charity.

All marmalade makers can rise to the challenge and enter their marmalades into whichever category catches their eye. The categories include traditional Seville, Merry (with alcohol), Citrus, First Timers, Peers & Political (for people in politics, not political marmalade!), Children's, Man-made, International, etc. For a full listing, together with a description of the various categories, please go to the Festival's website at www.dalemainmarmaladeawards.co.uk, where you will find more information and lots of useful advice.

Each jar is tasted and marked by the Cumbrian WI, together with a team of artisan judges, and, if it attains sufficient marks, is then given a Dalemain Gold, Silver or Bronze Award. Each entrant receives a mark card, together with the judges' feedback, a certificate and a thank-you letter. Plus they also get two-for-one entry to Dalemain Mansion and Historic Gardens.

The Best-In-Show marmalade is always chosen from all the Gold winners and is presented with a Dalemain Double Gold Award. The winner is then invited to have their recipe produced and scaled up by Fortnum & Mason for a period of one year, and it will be sold at their store as well as in The Marmalade Shop at Dalemain. A sum of 50p from each jar sold is donated to Hospice at Home around the world.

FEELING INSPIRED?

Check out our recipes for making 'vintage-inspired' marmalade by Bronze Award winner Seren Evans-Charrington in next month's Home Farmer.

FURTHER INFO

The application form is available to download at: **www.homefarmer.co.uk/marmalade-awards**.

For full information about the Awards, previous winning entries and full details of the categories, go to: **www.dalemainmarmaladeawards.co.uk**.

Twitter: **@marmaladeawards**

Photo: Hermione Hasell-McCosh **www.hermionemccosh.com**

HOME-MADE MARMALADE AWARDS ENTRY FORM 2015

Please send this in with your marmalade to arrive before 15th February 2015

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THE GUIDELINES

- Judging will be based on appearance, colour, consistency, aroma and flavour.
- Use ½lb–1lb-size jam jars (even smaller is acceptable if posted from farther afield).
- Use clean jam jars and fill them to the brim.
- Label jar with category and year made.
- If recycled metal tops are used they must be free from lettering and logos.
- Put your details on the bottom of the jar.
- If you would like to enter more than one category, please send a separate jar for each category selected, and mark your jar with the category number.

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☐ Please tick if you do not want your name and/or photograph to be used in any Awards or Festival promotional or publicity material.

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2 Military Marmalade **NEW**	
3 Dark & Chunky Marmalade	
4 Clergy Marmalade **NEW**	
5 Children's Marmalade – for children 13 and under, with a little help from an adult (Sponsored by Paddington Bear).	
6 Man-Made Marmalade	
7 'The 10th Anniversary Marmalade' with Interesting Additions (Sponsored by Paddington Bear)	
8 First Timers (Sponsored by Patteson's Glass)	
9 A Gathering of the Clans **NEW**	
10 International & Commonwealth Marmalade (Sponsored by Mackays) **NEW**	
11 Merry Marmalade – marmalade with alcohol (Sponsored by Laithwaite's Wines)	
12 Campanologist's Marmalade **NEW**	
13 Any Citrus Marmalade	
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15 A Marmalade McNab (Sponsored by *Country Life*) **NEW**	

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please visit www.marmaladeawards.com for entry forms

All entries must be received before **15th February 2015**. Post them to The Marmalade Awards, Dalemain Mansion, Penrith, Cumbria, CA11 0HB. Tel: 07580 916521 or email: **marmalade@dalemain.com**.

☐ Please tick this box if you would like us to forward your entry fee to your local hospice, and include a SAE. For admin purposes, the more people you can persuade to take part, the larger the cheque we can send. Your entry fee MUST, however, first be sent to Dalemain. Charities supported by the Marmalade Awards are **Action Medical Research**, **Hospice at Home** and **Marie Curie Cancer Care**.

■ Please tick this box if you subscribe to Home Farmer. Home Farmer will donate £100 to the charity pot if any subscriber wins one of the categories – good luck to all the entries!

PORRIDGE
the proper way

Oats are one of nature's **superfoods**. **Elizabeth McCorquodale** looks at **growing** and **harvesting** them, and provides a range of **delicious** porridge **recipes**

My dad was a Scotsman and he raised me on porridge made the proper way. That's to say *his* proper way, for, as any Scot will tell you, the *proper* way to make porridge is hotly disputed. Every evening he would put oats and water into a pot (a *particular* pot), stir it with the spurtle and cover it with a lid, then leave it to soften till morning. On rising at 5.30am he would set the oats to boil for three or four minutes, stirring constantly with the spurtle, then he would add a pinch of salt – one for the porridge and one for the milk. For all my 'growing up' years the pot and the spurtle remained the same, although he would ring the changes with the oats, which could be pinhead, rolled or cut – but needless to say never, *ever*, instant.

A good porridge needs a good porridge pot and a good porridge stick. The porridge pot should be heavy-bottomed to stop the porridge from catching on the base of the pot, and the stick – the spurtle (or spirtle, spurtil, spartle, spirl, spurl or spruttle… you can take your pick) – is an implement of sheer cooking pleasure, made just for the job. It allows you to get deep into the corners of the pot and stir quickly without causing a storm in your porridge pot. Rapid stirring is essential to avoid lumpy porridge, and lumpy porridge must be avoided at *all* costs!

Salt is the other essential in 'oat cuisine', and it's generally agreed that a pinch is plenty… but there the consensus ends, for just *when* to add that pinch is quite a different matter: some say to add it to the cooking water before heating; some say to add it just as you add the oats; but others prefer to stir it in just before serving. After many trials I have come to the conclusion that it really, really doesn't matter as long as it *has* been salted!

And then there is the quandary over cooking liquids! Purists, like my father, make their porridge from water and nothing else, while at the other end of the scale you will find those gourmands who make theirs with 100% milk with not a gill of water in sight… I have even heard wicked rumours that some of these gluttons have been seen adding cream after cooking! But the rest of us go for a happy, tasty and healthy middle ground – two-thirds water and one-third semi-skimmed milk makes a lovely, rich porridge that is still light and healthy and full of goodness.

PORRIDGE ON THE WORLD STAGE

The particular grain used to make porridge differs around the world and has changed over time as agricultural practices have been developed and shared between cultures. In the UK, most of North America and some parts of northern Europe, porridge refers exclusively to the gruel made from oats, but elsewhere, and throughout history, porridge has been more commonly made from the grains of barley and wheat, as well as from quinoa, sorghum, flax, rice, millet, rye, buckwheat, spelt and corn.



Porridge is simply a thick(ish) mixture of cooked grain and liquid, which – depending on its variety, processing and the length of time it has been soaked and cooked – can be coarse or smooth, thick or thin, and, indeed, savoury as well as sweet.

Oat groats are what is left after the oats have been threshed and winnowed. Pinhead (or steel-cut) oats are groats chopped into pieces, and they result in a porridge that is full of texture. Rolled oats have been steamed to soften them, then rolled out flat, and they come in jumbo, medium and fine. Rolled oats are quicker to cook than groats or pinhead (steel-cut) oats, but result in a porridge with less texture. These are the ones to choose for using in baking, batters and coatings, and to make oaty drinks.

SOWING YOUR OATS

Oats are easy to grow, as they require no special soil conditions or nutrients. Most types grow to about 1m tall and are planted at a rate of 900g to 1.3kg of seed per 90m^2, but an area of roughly 6m × 6m will produce enough oats to provide a family with all they could possibly need in a year.

Oats like a damper soil than most other grains, but they still need it to be well drained. If the weather is dry they will need watering through the season.

You can buy oats online or through a farm supply shop. You will have to search for hulless varieties, which don't have the same tough hull as other varieties, but it is well worth it to save the hard work of hulling.

Sow your oats in very early spring for harvesting the following autumn, and try, if at all possible, to choose a day when heavy rain is forecast to avoid the need to rake the seeds into the soil. If no rain is forthcoming, birds will eat most of the grain that you have so thoughtfully spread out on the surface of the field for them!



Facts

- Oats are burnt slowly by our bodies and, with their low GI (glycaemic index) level, provide energy over a long period, providing heat and a sense of fulfilment over several hours; just one reason why they are so good as part of a weight-loss diet. They are also very high in soluble fibre, which makes them one of the best foods to lower cholesterol; indeed, oat drinks are manufactured and sold – at a premium price – for just that purpose. So, if you have porridge with blueberries – see above – you are getting two superfoods in a single meal!
- The Great Wall of China is held together by porridge! Investigations into the structure of the Great Wall revealed that the mortar used to cement the stones together was largely made from the same rice porridge that fuelled the bellies of the peasants who built the wall.
- Hannibal won the battle of Trebia because he tricked the Romans into not eating their porridge. Hannibal and his lot had time to eat and rest, but he forced the Roman army to cross the river before they had time to eat their breakfast of porridge – the staple food of the Roman army, and many armies before and since.

"OATS ARE EASY TO GROW, AS THEY REQUIRE NO SPECIAL SOIL CONDITIONS OR NUTRIENTS"

Broadcast sow your oats, either by hand or with an automatic broadcast sower, which will do the job more evenly. They will take 1–3 weeks to germinate.

HARVESTING

Harvest the grains when they are about 1m tall (depending on the variety) and when they are in the 'dough stage' – when the kernel can be dented with a fingernail, but has matured beyond the 'milk stage', when milky fluid is released when you pinch the kernel. If you leave harvesting until the grain is fully ripe you will lose too many grains during harvest. Cut the stalks just above ground level, tie them into bunches, then hang the bunches under cover to dry for 10–14 days.

Threshing is the process of removing the seeds from the stalks. Place a large sheet over a hard surface and beat the bunches onto the sheet until all the grains have been released from the stalks, or cover the stalks with another sheet and stamp on them. I once used two toddlers on their tricycles to thresh a small harvest – it worked a treat and we all enjoyed ourselves tremendously.

Winnowing is the process of separating the chaff from the grain. As the chaff is lighter it is easy to do this by pouring grain from one bucket into another in front of a fan. The breeze should be strong enough to blow the chaff away and allow the kernels to drop into the second bucket. Do this until the grains are clean.

HULLING

Hulling oats is the most difficult part of processing the crop for home farmers. You can hull small quantities by roasting the grain for 60–90 minutes in an oven set at 80°C, then run the kernels lightly through a blender, a coffee grinder or a mill, and pick out the cracked hulls. Grain grinders are available for larger quantities.



PORRIDGE RECIPES

You could try eating your porridge like they used to on St Kilda in the Outer Hebrides, where the islanders cooked their porridge with a puffin! It must be said that this isn't as odd as it first sounds, as puffins were plentiful on the islands and savoury porridge was a staple of the islanders' diet. The puffin, suitably plucked, gutted and jointed just like any other table bird, added flavour and nutrition to the everyday porridge pot – rather than the more fantastic vision of the poor thing with its maître d'hôtel plumage, colourful beak and sad eyes swimming around the porridge pot of my imagination!

If, however, puffin porridge doesn't inspire you, then you might try my own favourite porridge mix instead.

PERFECT PORRIDGE

INGREDIENTS

1 cup half-and-half pinhead and jumbo porridge oats
1 cup milk
2 cups water
Pinch of salt

THE NIGHT-BEFORE METHOD

1 The night before, combine all the ingredients in a heavy-bottomed saucepan, bring to the boil and stir, then cover and leave it to sit in the pan overnight.



Stir it!

Rapid stirring with your spurtle is essential to avoid lumpy porridge, and lumpy porridge must be avoided at all costs!

PERFECT PORRIDGE: TOPPINGS

- Heather honey or golden syrup
- Demerara sugar and cream
- Buttered apples and cinnamon
- Figs and honey
- Grilled plums, cinnamon and brown sugar
- Pears and grated chocolate
- Bananas and golden syrup
- Maple syrup and toasted pecans
- Sweetened stewed rhubarb
- Dried fruit and toasted nuts



2 The next morning, simply reheat the porridge (which will be wonderfully creamy by this point), stirring briskly, then add your favourite topping and enjoy.

THE MORNING METHOD

Combine all the ingredients and bring to the boil as above, but continue to simmer, stirring well, until the porridge is thick and creamy – about 5 minutes – then add your toppings and enjoy.

CRANACHAN

Cranachan is porridge with bells on, and is such a delectable way of enjoying your oats that it simply must be included here. Serve it up as a delightful dessert after a meal of Scottish salmon or roast Scottish beef!

INGREDIENTS

570ml double or whipping cream
85g rolled oats
7 tbsp whisky
3 tbsp honey – heather honey for authenticity!
450g raspberries

METHOD

1 Lightly toast the oats in a frying pan and set aside to cool.
2 Whip the cream until stiff, then fold into the toasted oatmeal, whisky and honey.
3 Spoon the cream mixture into dessert glasses alternately in layers with the raspberries, then serve.

ATHOLL BROSE

Atholl Brose should be prepared several days before consuming, and is the drinkable version of Cranachan – a combination of 7 parts oat milk, 7 parts whisky, 7 parts cream and 1 part heather honey, all stirred up with a silver spoon!

INGREDIENTS

Oat milk
Whisky



Cream
Heather honey
Silver spoon (optional)

METHOD

1 Make up the oat milk by soaking 1 portion of rolled oats to 3 portions of water.
2 Cover and leave it in the fridge for 3–4 days to steep, then strain the liquid through a fine-meshed sieve and add it to the other ingredients to make your Atholl Brose

It is absolutely delicious!

TAKEAWAY PORRIDGE POTS

INGREDIENTS

1 cup oats
4 cups water
Large pinch of salt
5 large jam jars

METHOD

1 Bring the oats, water and salt to the boil and simmer for 3–4 minutes, stirring all the time, then turn off the heat.
2 Divide the porridge into 5 large jars, then screw on the lids and leave to cool. Once cold, place the jars in the fridge.
3 Each morning, take a jar out of the fridge and pop it into your bag.
4 At work, heat your porridge by removing the lid and giving it a stir, then pop it into the microwave for 2–3 minutes.
5 Finish off by adding the toppings of your choice. Now enjoy!







BANGERS

for the nervous!

Sausages are one of the **original fast foods**. Making your own lets you **choose** the **ingredients**, **reduces** the **cost** and lets you tailor them to your **own requirements**. It is also fun. **Ruth Tott** gets stuffing

My first attempt at making sausages went a bit wrong. I decided, in my infinite wisdom, that I could get a butcher to pre-mince a 70:30 mix of pork shoulder and belly fat. All fine so far, and all perfectly correct. I then got it into my head that I could mix the mince, along with the rusk, seasoning and water in the food processor. At this point there was no going back and my sausage-making fate was sealed.

Meanwhile, I was busy dreaming up various flavours, including the addition of marmalade, adding yet another layer to my bad sausage-making experience.

Then I added the rusk – an essential part of the sausage mix – and soaked the spool casings as per instructions. At least that went right. I then roped in a sausage-making chum (my husband) because sausage making should be a shared experience, and the next bit where you actually put the mince through the stuffer into the casings to come out in neat little sausage shapes is not really a one-person job – at least not for beginners.

Because I had created a meaty goo by using the food processor, it was hard to push it through to start with. The taste-test wasn't up to much either, and as for the marmalade ones – I think even the dog is going to turn her nose up at those. It goes well with bacon – in my opinion – but that pairing is obviously a fluke!

I made my sausage confessional to an experienced sausage maker, who really couldn't understand what all the fuss was about. His first bit of advice was to make life a bit easier for myself: just buy pork mince from the butcher and use that. Also, buy a sausage mix that *already has* the rusk, seasoning and even the salt added to it. All you need to do is add the water.

I must admit my 'home farmer' inner self baulks at what seems like such a short cut, but I really wanted to master this, and his sage advice made sense. It's best to get a little experience under your belt first, then go on to do your experimenting.

FIRST SAUSAGES

INGREDIENTS

(NB: The colder the ingredients are prior to, and after, mixing, the better)

500g pork mince (and don't go lean – they need fat)
70g of complete sausage seasoning mix of your choice
100ml cold water
Sausage casings

METHOD

1. Soak your sausage casings, as per the instructions. You can now get sausage casings on spools, which saves you quite a bit of bother.
2. Put the mince in a bowl, add the seasoning and mix it all together well with your hands, making sure that the seasoning is fully incorporated – "Mix with vigour," my sausage champion told me.
3. Begin to add the cold water slowly, so it gets mixed in fully.
4. If you were creating your own flavours you would, at this point, take a small, meatball-sized piece and lightly fry it (or microwave it) as a taste and texture test. You could then add more seasoning, if needed. If you've used the ready-mixed seasoning you should still do this, just in case.
5. Put the mix in the fridge and chill for at least 60 minutes. If you have a mincer you can put it through again at this point, but it's not essential.
6. You are now ready to get stuffing.
7. Put your sausage casings onto the tube (see below left).
8. Put the mince in the top of the stuffer and, using one hand to push the meat down and the other to turn the handle, gently push the meat through so it comes out of the stuffing nozzle and into the casing. This is where your sausage-making chum comes in handy, as they will have to 'steer' the sausages out onto the tray. Leave a generous 10cm of unfilled casing at the start and the end of stuffing (see below).





Workstation



I used a manual mincer and stuffer designed for the home sausage-making market. It's not super slick, but then I didn't pay silly money for it, and it does the job perfectly well for small batches, and includes a mincer *and* a pasta-making function, too. If I wanted to upgrade, this little machine would have to be replaced by something a bit more substantial. For home sausage making it would still most likely be a manually operated machine, so the cost would not be huge. Of course, if I wanted to launch my own range of gourmet bangers, then investing in an automated mincer and stuffer would be a priority.

To set up your sausage-making workstation, you will need a clean work surface, a tray to collect the sausages, and the stuffer *securely* in place at the edge of the tray. You will need to make room for the handle to turn comfortably, which could mean raising the stuffer slightly.

A BIT ABOUT COSTINGS

If you go for top-end meat, the savings of making your own, compared to buying, work out at approximately 33 per cent. If you opted to use your own seasoning, the savings would be even more. This doesn't include the initial equipment needed. The basic home mincer and stuffer used for this article starts around £18. If you wanted to scale up you would be looking at spending around £100 for the stuffer alone. Automatic stuffers come in at far more and would take up over half the size of your kitchen!

As another alternative, both Kenwood and Andrew James offer a range of additional attachments, including a mincer and a sausage stuffer for some of their food processors.







"IT'S BEST TO GET A LITTLE EXPERIENCE UNDER YOUR BELT FIRST, THEN GO ON TO DO YOUR EXPERIMENTING"

9 Getting the right thickness immediately is a challenge so go slowly, with each person working at the same speed. It's best to be relaxed and appreciate that they will probably not be perfect, factory-made, "emulsified, high-fat, offal tubes" (if anyone remembers how Sir Humphrey suggested the EU wanted to reclassify British sausages in *Yes Minister*).

10 You should now, if it's all gone according to plan, be the owner of a long length of sausage forming a heap on the tray. Starting at one end, twist your sausage at regular intervals to form a typical sausage shape and a length of your choice. Work your way along the entire length of the sausage. The extra 10cm of unfilled casing will give you a little flexibility here.

Cover the sausages and put them in the fridge overnight, so they form a bloom.

Top Tip!

Sausage making should be a shared experience, because putting the mince through the stuffer into the casings is not really a one-person job.

OUR SECOND ATTEMPT

The sausages were actually rather good and cooked up extremely well. We've obviously got quite a way to go yet, but the confidence and keenness are now building up, and that's the first critical stage. We had some problems with a little air getting trapped in the sausage when it is cooking. Stuffing at a steady and even pace should help prevent this. I challenge anyone to do it and keep a straight face!

Sausage Making

We've teamed up with Weschenfelder to offer a Home Farmer Sausage-making Kit as well as seasonings in smaller bagged sizes (see next page).

THE KIT CONTAINS

- 1 × manual mincer and stuffer
- 1 × 140g bag 'Old English' complete seasoning mix
- 1 × 140g bag complete Moroccan spice seasoning
- 1 × spool hog casing (10 yards)
- 1 × pack of home pack sheep casing
- 1 × *The Sausage Book* by Paul Peacock

The total cost is **£29.99**, including postage (see page 85 opposite). The manual mincer and stuffer can also be used for shaping pasta.

TO PRICK, OR NOT TO PRICK

There is great debate (yes, seriously) over whether to prick your sausage, or whether to fry, grill, oven-bake, or poach and fry, or poach and grill it. I'm an oven-baking sort of girl myself, as this still allows the sausage to become a micro-oven, cooking merrily inside its own skin. Heston Blumenthal suggests poaching your sausages first, then frying them, but I prefer to let them stew in their own juices. There was also a TV ad some years ago, where Jamie Oliver scaled a cliff to prevent a camper pricking his sausages.

Ready, Steady... Stuff!



Sausage in a Box

Each kit comes with the sausage mix and casings to make about 20 sausages, and the instructions on the box will show you how to make your own sausages as easy as pie! Also included is a plastic filling bag for those who do not have a machine. Kit makes up to 20 sausages.

- ☐ Gluten-free Sausage – £12
- ☐ Cumberland Sausage – £12
- ☐ Lincolnshire Sausage – £12
- ☐ Farmhouse Sausage – £12

Everything but the Burger...



Our burger making kit includes an easy to operate and clean, sturdy burger press. You also get a pack of cellophane burger discs for separating your burgers, and a pack of Burger & Chopped Onion Mix, which comes with a very easy to follow recipe and enough mix to make 10lb of burgers. £15.95

1 x Rigamonti Burger Press
1 x Pack of Cellophane Discs (500 approx.)
1 x Burger & Chopped Onion Mix (340g)



Sausage Making Kit

Everything you need to get making your very own sausages - just add meat and water.

Just add water and meat

1 x Household Mincer and Stuffer
10 yards Ready-spooled Hog Casing
1 x Pack of Home Pack Sheep Casings
140 g *Old English Complete Sausage Mix
140 g *West Country Cider Apple Complete Sausage Mix
1 x The Sausage Book by Paul Peacock

Please note the complete sausage mixes contain gluten.
* We can swop one of these mixes with Fire Cracker Sausage Mix. Please state on order form or by phone.

Total cost including postage £29.99

We also stock a wide range of alternative seasonings, rusk, gluten free breadcrumbs

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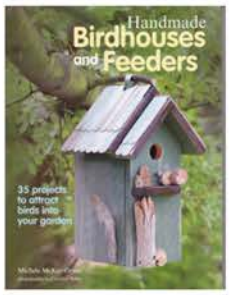
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Books for the Home Farmer





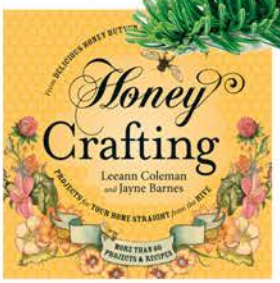
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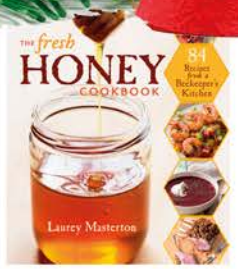
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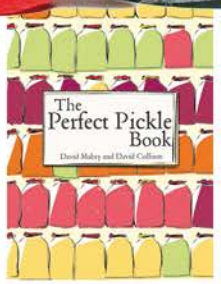
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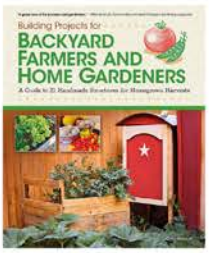
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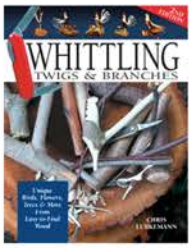
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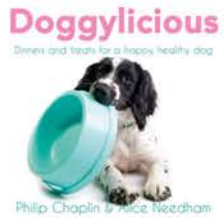
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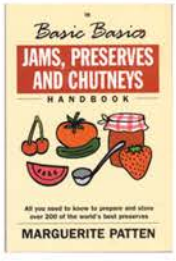
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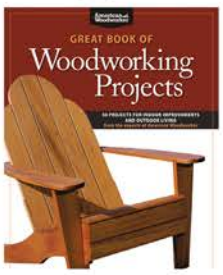
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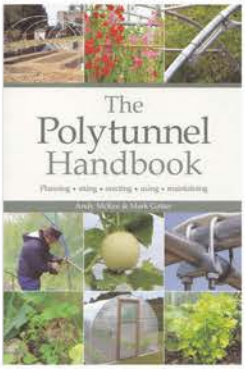
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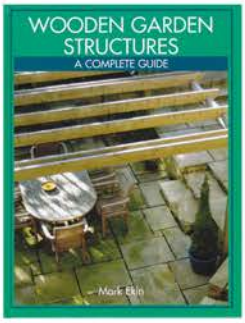
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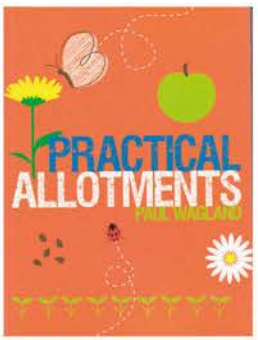
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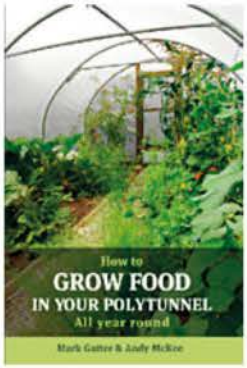
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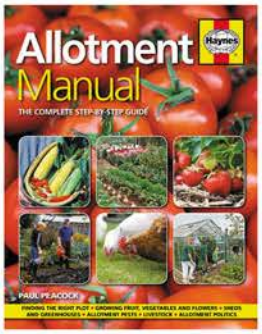
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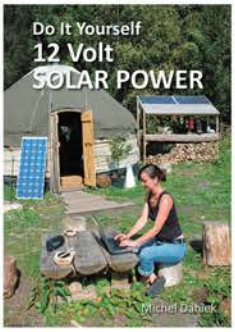
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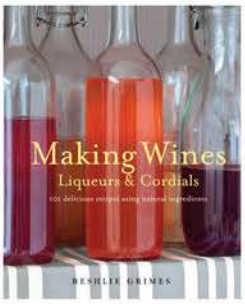
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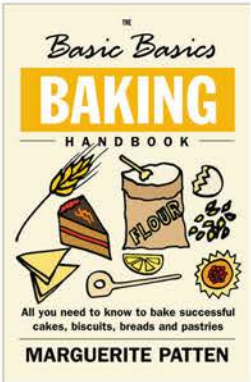
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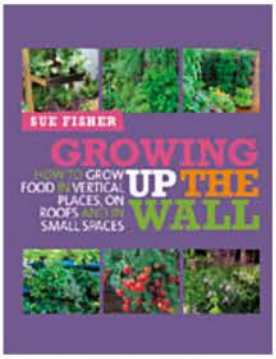
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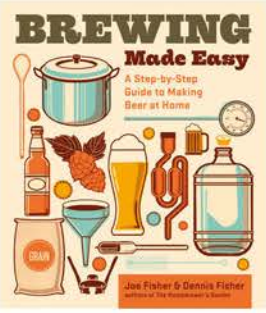
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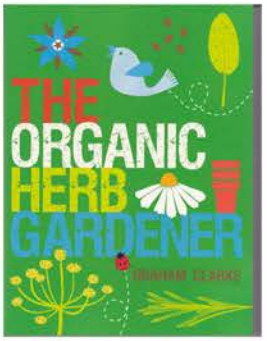
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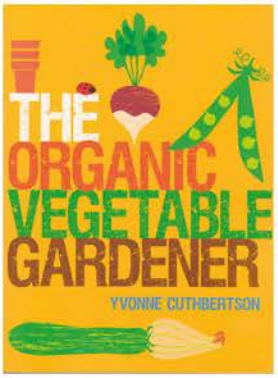
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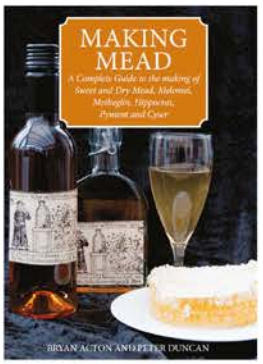
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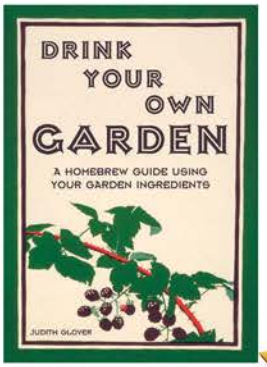
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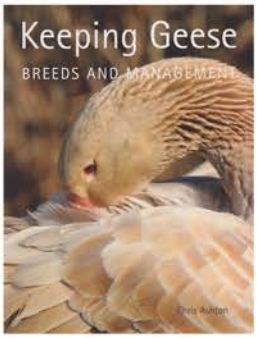


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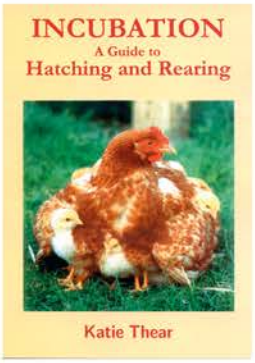


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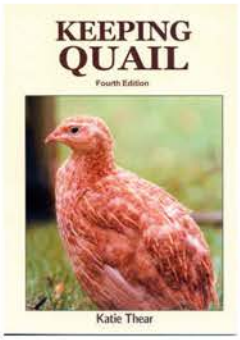
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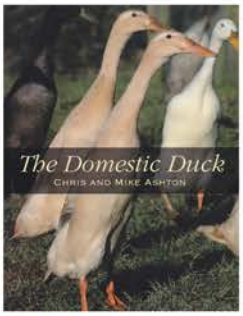
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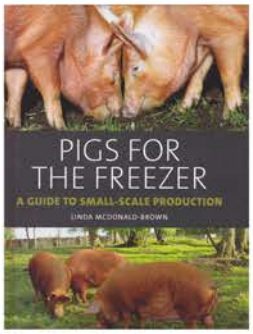
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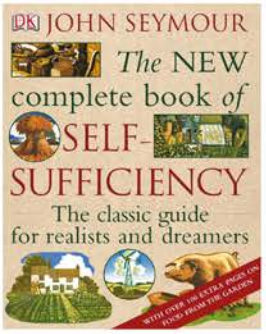
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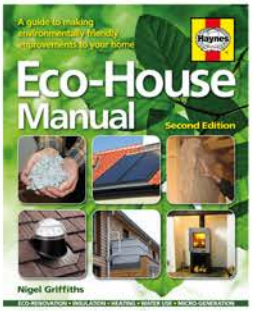
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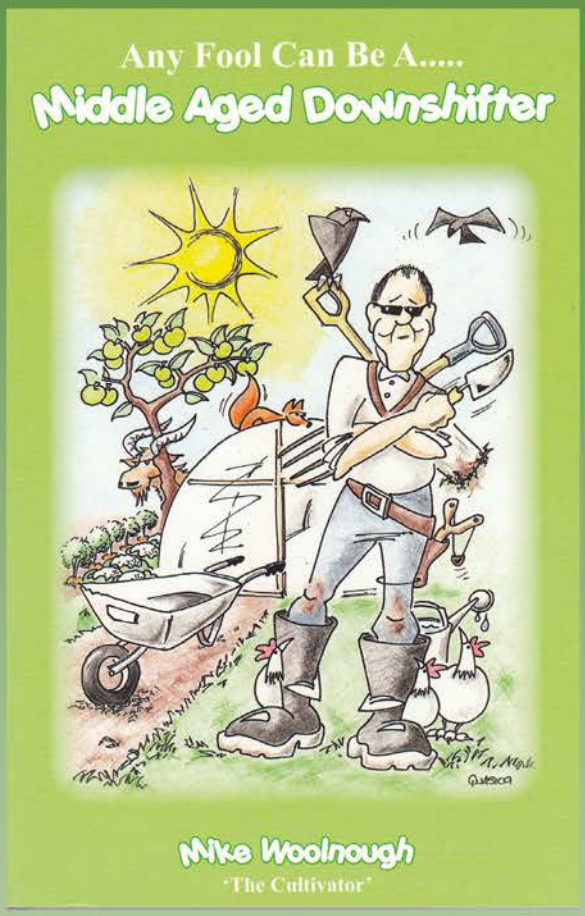
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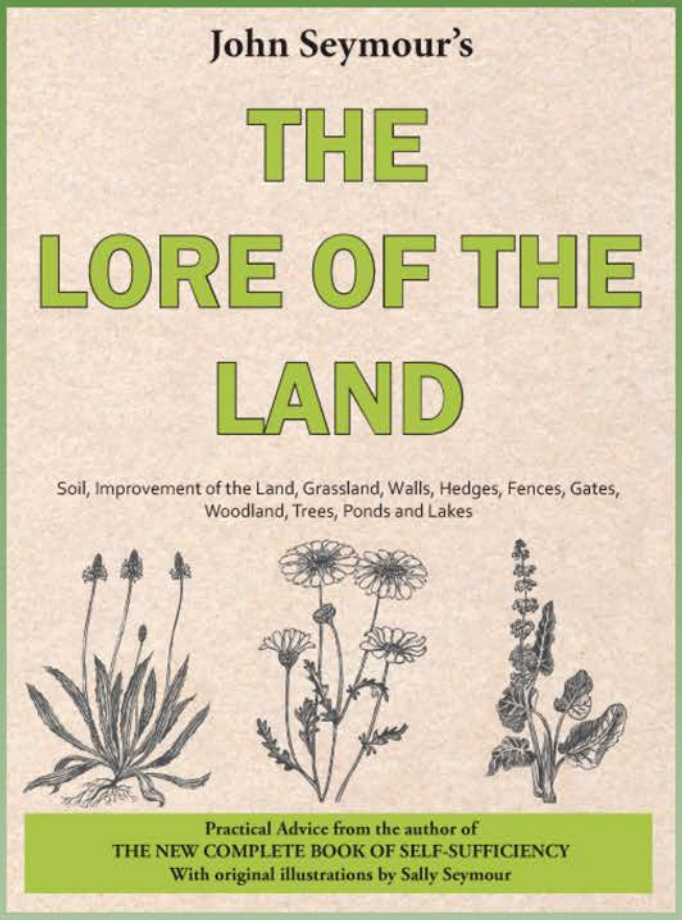
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OVER TO YOU

Readers have their say

READ THE LABEL

Our thanks to Mike Boyd for emailing us this word of caution for anyone making preserves.

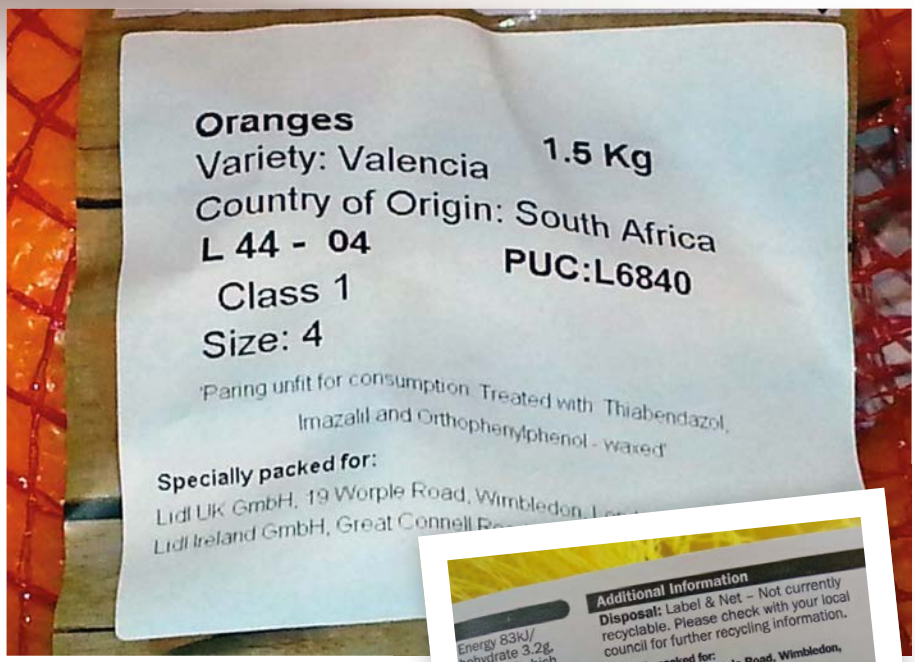
Ruth,

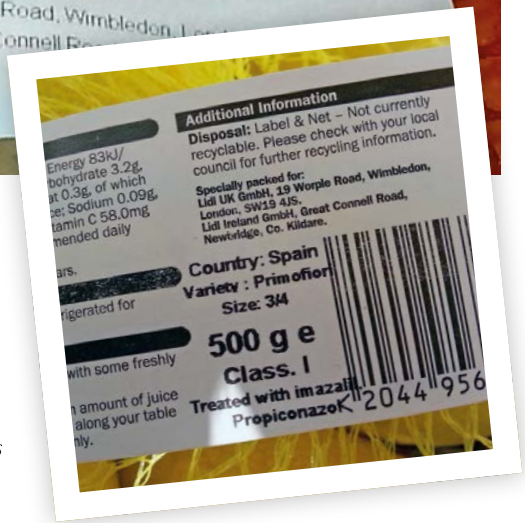
I thought that I'd share a recent experience with you at Home Farmer. You may feel that this could be passed on to the readers.

We are keen jam-makers here at Sunny Bank, and having made a lot this year, decided to make some marmalade for a change. My wife was in a large, well-known supermarket, and noticed that they had nice oranges and lemons at a good price. I know that most marmalade tends to be made after Christmas, but we thought that we could make some with some sweeter oranges, rather than wait for the Sevilles to come in to the shops. She bought some lemons that were labelled as 'unwaxed', and also bought 6kg of 'Valencia' oranges.

At home, she examined the label on the oranges to see if we needed to wash them and noticed a very small panel of print, not much bigger than a postage stamp, with tiny, very faint text. I needed to use a jeweller's eyeglass to read it properly, and was surprised to see that it stated: 'Paring unfit for consumption' – I take 'paring' to mean the skin, peel, or rind. It went on to list three chemicals that had been applied to the fruit; presumably this is why the skins were unfit to eat. They were: Thiabendazol, Imazalil *and* Orthophenylphenol. *Research on the Net shows that they are all used to prevent moulds, yeasts and bacterial activity on fruit.*

Close inspection of the lemons' label showed that they had been treated too, but with Imazalil *and* Propiconazol.





Now, clearly, the use of these is quite legal and approved, but personally, I'm not too keen on eating such stuff, some of which are known carcinogens, and are banned in some parts of the world.

The fact that it actually tells you not to eat the skins must mean that there's some concern over its safety. The result is that we had a large amount of fruit that we could not use for the purpose that we bought it for, as we needed the peel for the marmalade. Instead, we got the juice out and froze it to use in something else.

What about people who had not seen the microscopic writing, and had used the orange peel for cooking, perhaps for making mincemeat, or glacé or crystallised fruit? We try hard to be 'food-aware', and yet still eat supermarket produce. Perhaps we should only use organic? We do grow a lot of our own stuff, but so far, oranges on the Welsh border have proved a bit too difficult…

Regards, Mike Boyd

'STILTON' WATCH

Thank you to all the readers who took the time to phone me to enthuse about how well their Stilton-type cheese was progressing. It's really rewarding to hear this. We've put our own in the fridge now to slow down the final maturing process, as we really want to share it at Christmas. My initial Camembert was a success, but eventually became so strong it was more on the Stinking Bishop scale. Now, I like my cheese strong, and there is a family tale of me digging into some Danish Blue my mum left at the bottom of the pram when I was wee, much to the horror of onlookers, but even I found it slightly too strong. I'm going to make some more the same weekend I make the Christmas cake so it's ready for the family get-together, but I shall leave it to mature in the fridge rather than the 'cheese cave'.



MAKING YOUR OWN

In last month's issue we published our recipe for three flavours of butter tablet, one of which used dulce de leche. We mentioned that you could find this ingredient in the 'posher' parts of the supermarket. Thank you to reader Sally Clarkson-Smith for sending in her recipe; we've now road-tested it and it's a corker.

HOME-MADE DULCE DE LECHE

INGREDIENTS

1 vanilla pod, split in two
1 litre whole milk
300g sugar
½ tsp rock salt

METHOD

1 Put the milk, sugar and salt in a heavy-based saucepan and put on a medium heat. Whisk continuously until the mixture comes to the boil, then reduce the heat to just simmering.
2 Scrape the seeds out of the vanilla pod, add both the seeds and the pod to the mixture, then cook for 90 minutes, stirring regularly. Ensure the milk doesn't boil or burn.
3 After 90 minutes the milk should have reduced and turned a lovely pale caramel colour. If you want a thicker mixture (for fillings or butter tablet – see last month's issue), then keep it on the heat for a bit longer, but remember that it will thicken as it cools.
4 Discard the vanilla pod before using.

Unlike the 'posh' ones from the supermarket, you will have to store this in the fridge, and it will only keep for 2 weeks.



FEEDBACK

We really welcome all your feedback, both good and bad, so please keep it coming. Sally – you've bagged yourself a tenner for your recipe. You can contact me via:

Email: **ruth@homefarmer.co.uk**

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CLEAN UP!

Cleaning through the ages

Seren Evans-Charrington challenges the notion that chemicals keep us **clean** and **healthy** as she picks some of her favourite **effective natural cleaners** from times gone by

Leafing through my 1861 copy of *Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management,* it becomes apparent that during the Victorian age the chore of household cleaning was tackled with a range of natural ingredients. Nowadays, when looking to eradicate dirt and grime from our homes, we are presented with a dazzling array of chemical-based proprietary cleaners. Because of the ease and availability of commercial preparations, with their claims of supercharged stain removing and germ eradicating properties, it is easy to forget that there are plenty of natural cleaning methods that have proved themselves throughout time to be just as effective as their chemical counterparts, but without the packaging waste, the harm to the environment or hazards to our health. In addition, home-made, natural cleaning products are also kinder to our pocket, as a basic natural cleaning kit requires no fancy bottles of wonder product, just simple household ingredients and a bit of know-how.

The world we live in is full of man-made chemicals, and our largest organ, our skin, is often subjected to contact with a wide range of them every day: immersing our bare hands into cleaning products (such as washing-up liquid), contact with clothes washed in detergent, touching surfaces and implements that still have a chemical residue on them. And we also breathe in chemicals; if you use a flammable spray furniture polish that is petroleum-based, it can lead to headaches and a lack of concentration, and can even depress the central nervous system.

Chemical disinfectants often contain triclosan, which for decades has been considered the easiest, cheapest and safest way to kill bacteria, and is commonly found in antibacterial soaps, deodorants, toothpastes, mouthwashes, first-aid creams, cleaning supplies, clothes, and even in toys. There have been many studies researching the effects of triclosan, and fears have even been voiced by the FDA in the USA that overuse of products containing it can lead to bacteria building up greater resistance to antibiotics. It seems that the proverb, "We must eat a peck of dirt before we die", is indeed true. In studies of what is called the 'hygiene hypothesis', many researchers have concluded that organisms like the millions of bacteria, viruses, and especially worms, that enter the body alongside 'dirt', spur the development of a healthy immune system. It has been suggested that children raised in an ultraclean environment, filled with chemical cleaners, are more prone to allergies and illness, as they are not being exposed to organisms that help them develop appropriate immune systems.



Although I'm not overly keen on housework and admit to sharing Agatha Christie's sentiment that, "the best time for planning a book is while you're doing the dishes", I'm not advocating that we never clean, just that we adopt a more natural approach. I also advise abandoning the purchase of those pretty bottles of

SEREN'S NATURAL RECIPES

VARNISHED WOOD CLEANER

INGREDIENTS

Pure essential lemon oil
½ cup warm water

METHOD

1. Add a few drops of lemon oil to the water.
2. Mix well and spray onto a soft cotton cloth – the cloth should only be slightly damp.
3. Wipe your furniture with the cloth, and finish by wiping once more using a dry, soft cotton cloth.

MOTH DETERRENT

INGREDIENTS

Dried lemon peel
Dried lavender seeds

METHOD

Tie the lemon peel and lavender seeds up in muslin bags to make clothes smell fresh and to deter moths.





"THE AROMATIC ROSEMARY IN THIS RECIPE ACTUALLY NEUTRALISES THE SMELL OF THE PUNGENT VINEGAR..."



SCRATCH REPAIR FOR NATURAL WOOD

METHOD

1. Rub a Brazil nut or walnut into the scratch so that it fills the area.
2. Leave for 5–10 minutes, allowing oil from the nut to soak in and repair the scratch, then buff the area with a soft, lint-free cloth.

SHOE POLISH

INGREDIENTS

Olive oil
Pure essential lemon oil

METHOD

1. Add a few drops of lemon oil to the olive oil and apply to your shoes with a thick cotton rag.
2. Leave for a few minutes, then wipe and buff with a clean, dry rag.

This is great for conditioning leather and works well on bags and coats too.

LOO CLEANER

INGREDIENTS

125g baking soda
200ml vinegar

METHOD

1. Mix the baking soda and vinegar, then pour it into the toilet basin and let it sit for a few minutes.
2. Scrub with a brush, then rinse.

RUST REMOVER

INGREDIENTS

Rock salt
1 lime

METHOD

1. Sprinkle a little rock salt on the rust and squeeze lime juice over the salt until it is saturated.
2. Leave the mixture on for 2–3 hours, then use the rind to scrub away the residue.

nice smelling 'eco' products, as many of them just don't have the oomph needed to lift grime, and they often tend to be an expensive and unnecessary purchase.
I live in a household that includes animals, children and a muck-magnet husband, and they result in a constant need to lift grubby fingerprints off paintwork and other surfaces. Whilst leafing through a handwritten household manual dating from the 1700s, in amongst recipes for blacking, horse powders, fever balls and patent polish, I happened upon a perfect and yet simple recipe for surface cleaning. Below, is my version of this recipe, which has been put to good use in my household and is my new favourite wonder cleaner.

HOUSEHOLD ASTRINGENT

INGREDIENTS

6 sprigs of rosemary
Distilled white vinegar

METHOD

1 Place the rosemary in a saucepan and add enough vinegar to cover the herbs.
2 Bring to the boil, then remove from the heat and place the vinegar and herbs into a clean jam jar.
3 Allow to steep overnight.
4 Strain the vinegar into a clean spray bottle and use as a surface spray, or keep it in a jar and dip a cleaning cloth into the rosemary vinegar to use for rubbing down dirty paintwork, tiles and varnished or laminated surfaces.

HANDY HINT

My rather battered copy of *The Book of Hints and Wrinkles*, from 1939, gives a wonderful tip for cleaning your house as well as some lovely recipes. It advises: "Begin your cleaning at the top of the house, and work downwards, doing the kitchen last of all. Prepare one room at a time, cleaning out all the cupboards and drawers, sorting their contents and getting rid of rubbish which somehow manages to collect in the most orderly of houses." It then proceeds to give instructions on 'how to turn out a cupboard'. Well, sound advice never ages, although time constraints and priorities have undoubtedly changed.

I have long raved about the cleaning power of vinegar, but my husband has always groaned about the smell, usually muttering comments about chip shops and pickling factories. The aromatic rosemary in this recipe actually neutralises the smell of the pungent vinegar, and it's cheap and effective, with no headachy chemical smells to contend with.

TRUSTY BEESWAX POLISH

My mother-in-law once said that, "beeswax makes a home", and she has a valid point, for the smell of beeswax polish *does* lend a homely and well-cared-for feel to a room. Due to the cost of commercially bought beeswax polish, I have been making my own for years, and a little really does go a long way. Over time I have tried various recipes, but the one below is my favourite, and it's the one I even had the opportunity to show the late Lynda Bellingham how to make on *Country House Sunday*.

INGREDIENTS

50g pure soap flakes (Castile soap)
100g beeswax, grated
500ml turpentine (this *must* be pure turpentine – available from artists' shops)
250ml warm water
10 drops pure essential lavender oil

METHOD

1 Put the water and soap flakes in a pan and dissolve the flakes over a moderate heat.
2 Put the grated beeswax into the turpentine in a double boiler, or a bowl over a pan of hot water, and warm gently until the beeswax has dissolved. *Don't* be tempted to put the beeswax and turpentine in a saucepan over a direct flame, as it is highly flammable!
3 When the beeswax has melted, add the soap mixture to it and stir with a wooden spoon. It will be a milky-white colour and should be completely liquid.









4 Remove it from the heat and stir in the lavender oil, then pour into clean storage jars.

If you fancy a change from the smell of lavender oil, this polish can either be left natural or you can add 10 drops of pure essential sweet orange oil for a fresh and warming smell.





LEATHER FURNITURE CLEANER

This recipe for leather cleaner contained in *The Book of Hints and Wrinkles* is very effective, but you *must* remember to be sparing in its application, and it is only suitable for dark leathers.





INGREDIENTS
1 gill vinegar
2 gills linseed oil

METHOD
1 Stir the vinegar into the linseed oil.
2 Bottle, and rub a small quantity on the furniture using a soft cloth.
3 Finish by rubbing with a silk duster.

My own modern redaction of this recipe uses 100ml of white distilled vinegar to 200ml of boiled linseed oil. I use a lint-free cloth and apply the mix sparingly to my leather sofa. Then, after careful application (a little goes a long way), I finish by buffing it with a soft, clean cloth. It removes grime and conditions the leather beautifully, giving it a gentle shine.

NATURAL GLASS RINSE AID

Here is a glass-cleaning recipe that I rely on, and it's one which gives my drinking glasses and vases a real sparkle. As a poultry keeper I find it hard to resist any recipe that uses eggshells, and this recipe is effective and satisfying to make.

INGREDIENTS
2 eggshells
The juice of 2 lemons

METHOD
1 Crush the eggshells into a teacup and then pour the lemon juice over them.
2 Leave the eggshells to dissolve over a period of 48 hours, then strain the opaque, yellowish liquid to use on glass that has become cloudy or dull.

This gives a better sparkle to glass than any other product I've used.

SEREN'S TIP!

Whilst on the subject of glass cleaning, when it comes to streak-free windows it seems that the simplest remedies are the best. I found that combining 150ml of white vinegar with the juice of a lemon and 1 teaspoon of cornflour worked wonders. The ingredients must be combined well and put into a spray bottle that always gets a good shake before use; if it is applied using a lint-free cloth and the windows are then buffed with newspaper, they come up beautifully.

COPPER CLEANER

This is a recipe that I can't resist sharing, as it's one that uses up the winter wood ash that has built up in the bottom of the wood-burner, and it removes the tarnish from copper pans beautifully. This is a bit of a messy one to make and use, but it's a very simple procedure that is extremely effective.

INGREDIENTS
Wood ash
Juice of ½ lemon

METHOD
1 Half fill a teacup with wood ash, then slowly squeeze in the lemon juice. The acid from the juice will fizz and bubble a little as it makes contact with the alkaline ash, and you will end up with a thick grey paste.
2 Apply the paste to your copper (you can even paint it on if you wish), then simply polish it off with an old rag – it requires some elbow-grease, but the results are well worth it.

IN CONCLUSION

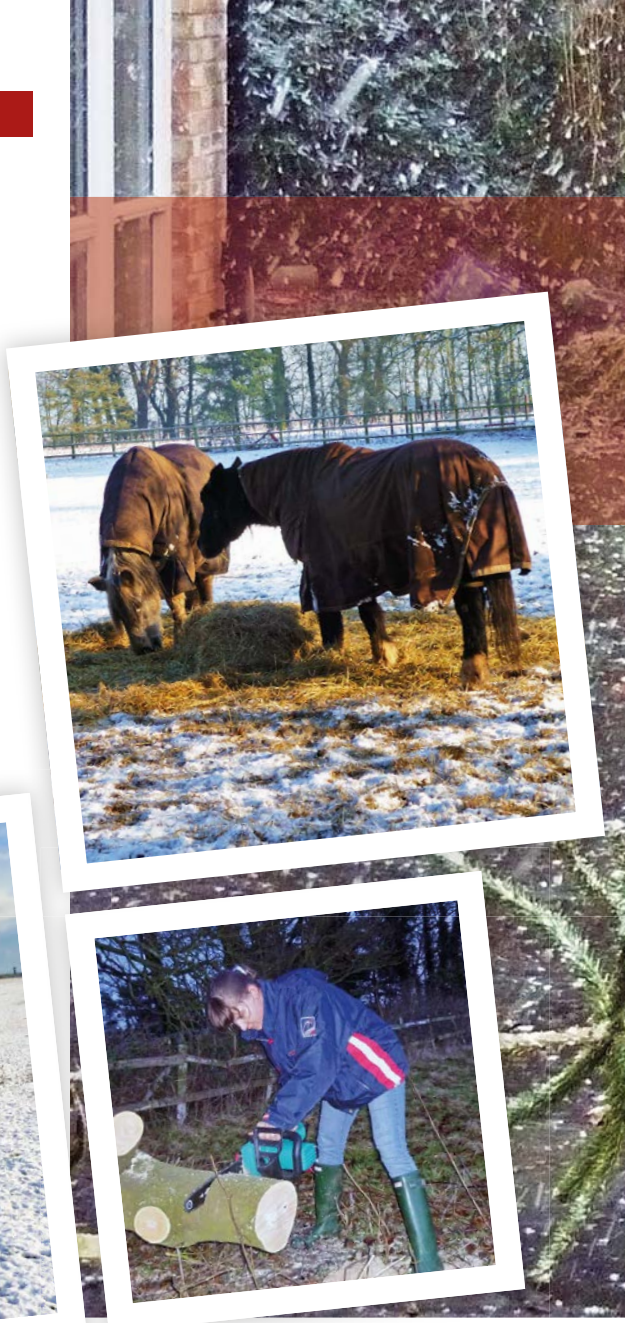
With a few basic ingredients it is possible to make natural cleaners for every room in the home. Armed with bicarbonate of soda, lemon juice, vinegar and essential oils you can have cheap and effective solutions without having to rely on expensive and chemical-laden products. So dusters at the ready for some good clean fun!

History

During the Victorian age, the chore of household cleaning was tackled with a range of natural ingredients.

HOME ALONE

Richard Barr was **'home alone'** after last **Christmas** and recorded the experience for posterity





After last Christmas, Richard's wife and his two stepdaughters literally went as far away as they could from him – to Melbourne, Australia, where one of them now lives and spends her days operating on people's brains. The saying about mice playing while the cat's away was disproved, as Richard thought he might get some work done, but did he succeed?

30TH DECEMBER

Socks undoubtedly hold the secret of our universe. No matter how carefully you pair them some always come out of the wash without their other halves. Stephen Hawking talks about the mysteries of black holes, but he need look no further than the mouth of our washing machine. I gave up, threw away the orphans and sent several bin bags to the clothes bank.

2ND JANUARY

Feeding the sheep I noticed a large tree had fallen down in the paddock – just where the fencing man was going to replace the fence. It was *good* because the tree at least had the courtesy to fall *before* the fence had been replaced, but *bad* because it had to be removed *before* the fencing man came.

3RD JANUARY

Struck down by a winter vomiting thing. I feel like death (not very) warmed up, but can't curl up in a ball because the animals need feeding, the house needs looking after and my clients have discovered that Christmas is over and want action. Thanks to whoever gave me that New Year's present!

4TH JANUARY

While having my near-death experience, two of the sheep announced that they were lame. Out came the vet and in will come a massive bill in due course. Fortunately, I am now on the road to recovery.

Meant to start on the tree today, but discovered our only chainsaw had no chain – and was so old I had no prospect of ever getting one to fit. Drove to Norwich for a replacement, came home and cursed… it refused to work when plugged in. I was on the point of returning it when Philippa, our youngest stepdaughter, turned up. She looked at the saw and suggested I take off the safety catch. The saw immediately roared into life.

6TH JANUARY

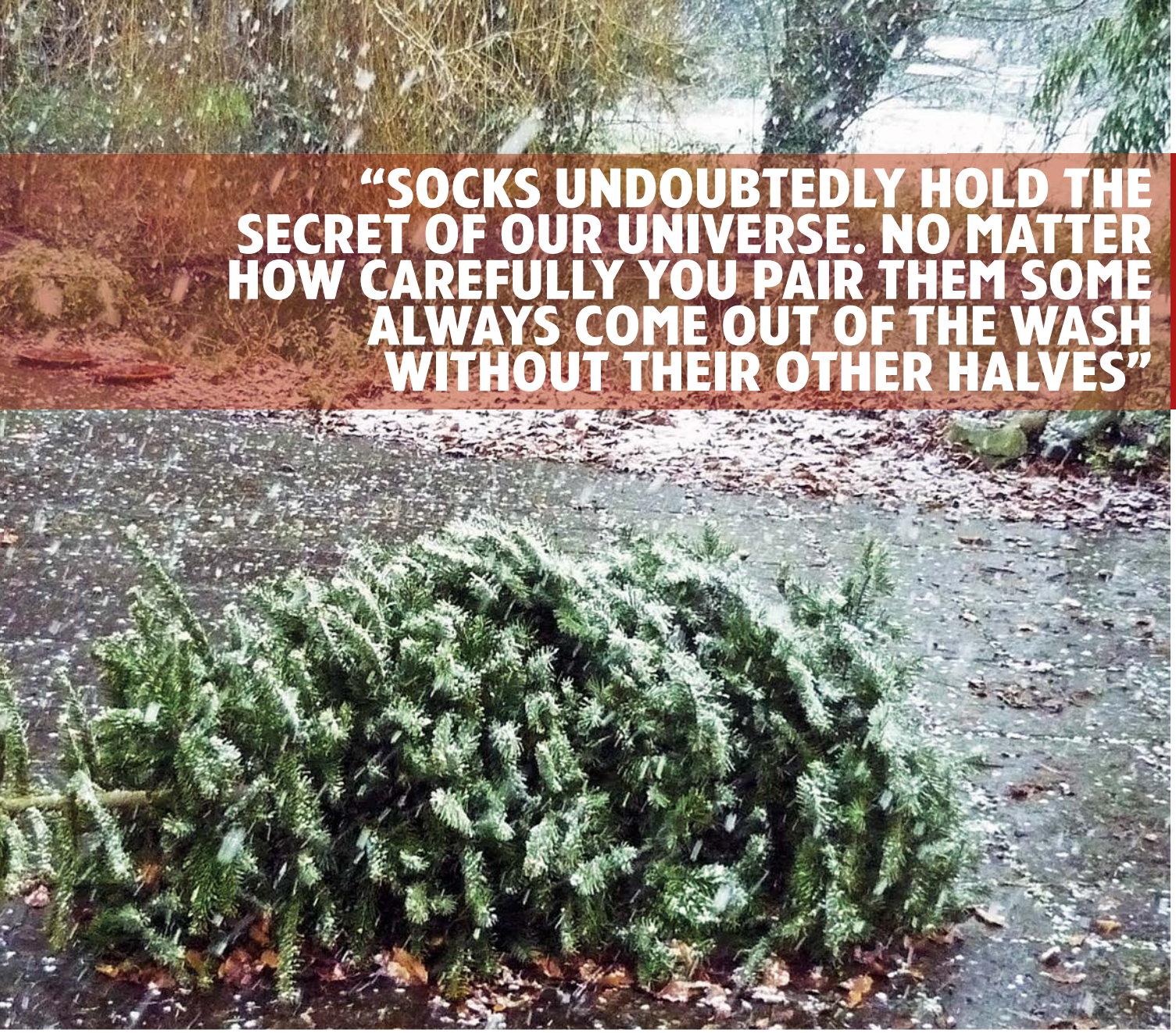
Went to our local pub, the Poacher's Pocket, with my friend Jim this evening and was telling him about the chainsawing. He told me about how a woman was looking out of her window at some men chainsawing a fallen tree. The saw slipped and the man's leg went flying across the road. The woman fainted, and when she came round she saw the man hopping back across the road with his leg under his arm. It was a wooden leg. Possibly an urban myth, but entertaining all the same.

9TH JANUARY

Got the vet's bill for dealing with the sheep – £187.14. How much roast lamb would that buy? And the bloody sheep is still limping – ungrateful beast!

12TH JANUARY

Famous last words perhaps, but in the past forty-eight hours there have been no major disasters. I am now on



"SOCKS UNDOUBTEDLY HOLD THE SECRET OF OUR UNIVERSE. NO MATTER HOW CAREFULLY YOU PAIR THEM SOME ALWAYS COME OUT OF THE WASH WITHOUT THEIR OTHER HALVES"

a train back to Norfolk and keeping my fingers crossed that I do not see a glow on the horizon from the burning thatch, or find all fourteen sheep lying upside down with their legs in the air, or the cats having shredded the curtains (or each other).

15TH JANUARY

It's not fair. It's pushing thirty degrees in Melbourne and currently minus eight here. This weather is doing our Christmas tree no good. I put it outside after dragging it through the house. Normally, it lies there till spring, but it looks so dejected with snow falling on it that I may have to take it back in and put its decorations back on.

Saw my accountant, who had pleasure in telling me that I would be paying a million (or even a billion) times more tax than Starbucks, Amazon and Google put together. It could even be trillions, because however many times you multiply it, so long as you start with zero, it remains zero.

16TH JANUARY

I woke to such a cold bedroom that there was frost on the inside of the panes. It took considerable willpower to heave myself out of bed. This delayed the animal food round till nearly noon, which involves feeding our useless chickens – the three of them have not laid an egg since September. Then I dealt with the girl sheep. They were at the far end of their field eating snow when they saw me and a bucket. We really must introduce sheep racing into Bacton. There was a thunder of hooves and the sheep were suddenly bearing down on me at close to the speed of sound. The trick is to get the food into their troughs *before* they arrive, otherwise I am likely to be trampled in the stampede.

In the other paddock are horses and the gay rams (see previous Home Farmers). However, there is a clash between the rams and the horses. I have to keep them apart, otherwise they eat each other's food. Normally, the rams go into a pen for their nosh, and the horses eat out of buckets outside the pen. That is what I expected to happen today, but one ram was not playing; it just stood there doing nothing. When I looked closely it had a gash on its head. On the 'Glasgow Coma' scale it scored only three (the maximum for a sheep is, of course, five). It looked dazed, with little stars floating around above its head. I called out the vet again, who peered into the sheep's ear and could see right through to the other side – no problem there. He diagnosed concussion, injected expensive medication into the sheep and prepared the next bill. Now we have to wait to see if the sheep will require a special-needs assessment.

And that is where my diary ended, as the cat came home. It's likely we'll be snowed in again!

SMALLHOLDER ASSOCIATIONS

NOT JUST FOR SMALLHOLDERS!

Smallholder Associations are a great way to meet like-minded people, share ideas, gain access to training, and in some cases share equipment. In almost all cases you don't have to be a 'smallholder' to become a member. Membership can be anything from £10–£20 a year.

Please note: **WHERE POSSIBLE WE HAVE INCLUDED TELEPHONE NUMBERS**. However, phone numbers are not always readily available – this is not because the organisations do not want you to contact them, more it's because the role is voluntary, with the people often doing a full-time job elsewhere. If any group listed below does have a phone number and we've not listed it, please email ruth@homefarmer.co.uk with a membership contact number so that we can include this in the future. Although these are smallholder groups, most of them welcome anybody with a genuine love of the countryside. Our thanks go to Richard Thompson for the listings. Please follow Richard's blog (Small Plot, Big Ideas) for inspiration http://smallplotbigideas.co.uk/. Please remember to mention Home Farmer when contacting these organisations. Many thanks.

BASH – BIGGAR AREA SMALLHOLDERS

A group of like-minded people all of whom work the land in some way. The smallholdings they run are diverse: some are small, others quite large; some grow only vegetables, others have significant amounts of livestock.
www.bashsmallholders.co.uk.

CENTRAL SCOTLAND SMALLHOLDERS' ASSOCIATION

The CSSA are a group of aspiring and existing smallholders who get together to share knowledge, experiences, and to socialise.
www.smallholders.webs.com.

CHESHIRE SMALLHOLDERS' ASSOCIATION

A dynamic and enthusiastic group of small-scale and hobby farmers, horse enthusiasts and countryside lovers.
www.cheshiresmallholders.org.uk.

(CASP) CORNISH ASSOCIATION OF SMALLHOLDERS AND PRODUCERS

This is a group of smallholders and craft producers in the south-west with the aim of bringing support to each other and a shared outlet for the fine produce and crafts that are produced and sold locally to ensure quality and fair prices.
www.cornishassociationsmallholdersand producers.co.uk. For membership enquiries telephone 07886 839785.

CUMBRIAN SMALLHOLDERS

A facebook group which provides a place to meet other smallholders, share information, advertise stock for sale and appeal for items wanted.
www.facebook.com/groups/cumbriansmallholders.

DERBYSHIRE SMALLHOLDERS' ASSOCIATION

Derbyshire Smallholders' Association was formed by a group of like-minded people with the aim of providing the opportunity for fellow smallholders, and those with just an interest in smallholding, to network and to pass on skills and information.
www.derbyshiresmallholders.co.uk.
For membership enquiries telephone 07871 189889.

DEVON ASSOCIATION OF SMALLHOLDERS (DASH)

DASH was established in 1986 to serve the needs and interests of smallholders and those planning to undertake any kind of country living.
www.devonsmallholders.co.uk.

DYFED SMALLHOLDERS' ASSOCIATION

The Dyfed Smallholders' Association has been active for over twenty-one years, and is one of the oldest smallholder groups in the UK.
www.dyfedsmallholders.org.uk.

EAST ESSEX SMALLHOLDERS' GROUP

A group of micro farmers who operate different size 'smallholdings'; some of them have a few backyard chickens, maybe grow a few fruit or vegetables, while others may have a pig, small herds/flocks, sheep or even a cow.
www.eastessexsmallholders.org.uk.

EAST RIDING SMALLHOLDERS' SOCIETY

A society of smallholders, 'home' farmers, small-scale agriculturalists, horticulturalists, self-sufficiency enthusiasts and country crafts people who have rural interests or are motivated to make productive their own small portion of the Earth's surface.
For membership enquiries please telephone 01757 638155.

FENLAND GOATKEEPERS' & SMALLHOLDERS' CLUB

The Club was originally started as a goatkeepers' society in the early 1970s, but in October 1994 the Club was transformed into the more general smallholders' group it is today. Since then the membership has grown to over 140 families. www.fgsc.org.uk.

GUERNSEY SMALLHOLDERS' ASSOCIATION

The Guernsey Smallholders' Association is a practical and social club, which forms a network of people who can offer each other advice, support and help, and which also facilitates the exchange of produce, skills and ideas.
www.guernseysmallholders.weebly.com.

HERTS & ESSEX SMALLHOLDERS AND GARDENERS

The group holds informal friendly meetings once a month, and members have a wide range of expertise on smallholding and gardening issues.
www.hertsandessexsmallholders.org.
Tel: 01279 815044.

KENT SMALLHOLDERS

The group was formed in 1987 by Hadlow College, to whom they are affiliated. They hold monthly meetings at the college with like-minded people who enjoy the countryside and the rural way of life, which is their only criteria for membership.
www.kentsmallholders.co.uk.

LINCOLNSHIRE SMALLHOLDING AND SELF-SUFFICIENCY CLUB

The purpose of Lincolnshire Smallholding and Self-sufficiency Club is to bring together like-minded people within Lincolnshire who are interested or involved in any aspect of smallholding or self-sufficiency.
www.lsssc.org.uk. Tel: 01205 290829.

MONTGOMERYSHIRE & DISTRICT SMALLHOLDERS

A friendly group of like-minded people who meet on a monthy basis, with guest speakers on a variety of subjects. New members and visitors are always welcome. We meet at Cobra Rugby Club in Meidod (Sat Nav SY22 6DA).
Tel: Barrie 01691 648406
Email: mmrjd@btinternet.com

NORFOLK SMALLHOLDERS' TRAINING GROUP

NSTG was set up in the late 1980s by a group of volunteers and now has members all over Norfolk (and beyond).
www.nstg.org.uk. Tel: 01953 483734.

NORTH SHROPSHIRE AND BORDERS SMALLHOLDERS' GROUP

A friendly group with varied interests – from window boxes to acres. Welcomes new members to their monthly meetings.
www.northshrop-smallholder.co.uk

NORTH YORKSHIRE SMALLHOLDERS' SOCIETY

This group was set up to help the smallholders of North Yorkshire and the North of England.
www.smallholder.org.uk.

NORTHUMBRIA SMALLHOLDERS' ASSOCIATION

A group of like-minded people from the north-east of England who enjoy the countryside and all that goes with it. The group formed following a smallholders' course at Kirkley Hall College.
www.northumbriasmallholders.co.uk.

ROMFORD SMALLHOLDERS' SOCIETY

They run a very large and popular allotment site in Romford and have been providing allotments for over one hundred years.
www.romfordsmallholders.wix.com/growyourown.

SCOTTISH SMALLHOLDERS' ASSOCIATION

The Scottish Smallholders' Association has been established for over 15 years. They are a small group based in the south-west of Scotland, and their aim is to share knowledge, experience and ideas about smallholding, and they welcome anyone with shared interests.

SEVERNVALE SMALLHOLDERS' ASSOCIATION

A group of people whose main interests are: flora and fauna, the environment, conservation and organic growing.
www.severnvalesmallholders.org.uk.

SHROPSHIRE SMALLHOLDERS' GROUP

A non-profit organisation providing members with information and mutual support on all aspects of smallholding, including animal husbandry, growing fruit and vegetables, and general smallholding interests.
www.shropshiresmallholdersgroup.org.

SMALL FARM TRAINING GROUP

The Small Farm Training Group (SFTG), based in Sussex, aims to enable members to learn better farming, smallholding and horticultural skills. Members are enthusiasts who want to know how to care for land, livestock and equipment in an efficient and professional manner.
www.sftg.co.uk.

SOMERSET SMALLHOLDERS' ASSOCIATION

The association was set up more than thirty years ago to bring together folk who have an interest in rural activities. Whether you have a flowerpot or a farm, you are welcome to join this friendly group of Somerset-based working smallholders.
www.somersetsmallholders.org.uk.
Tel: 07758 827869.

SOUTH WEST WALES SMALLHOLDERS

A facebook group page for all those who have a smallholding in SW Wales. You can advertise items for sale, or appeal for wanted items.
www.facebook.com/groups/218380055007087.

STAFFORDSHIRE SMALLHOLDERS' ASSOCIATION

A small but lively group of families and individuals who share an interest in the small-farming way of life.
www.staffsmallholders.info.
Tel: 01889 881377.

SUFFOLK SMALLHOLDERS' SOCIETY

A non-profit group of like-minded people interested in smallholding, self-sufficiency, allotments, fruit and vegetable growing and animal husbandry on a small scale.
www.suffolksmallholders.co.uk.
Tel: 01449 711178.

WEST SUSSEX SMALLHOLDERS' CLUB

A friendly smallholders' support group serving West Sussex, East Sussex, Surrey and Hampshire.
www.westsussexsmallholdersclub.org.uk.
Tel: 01903 205470.

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As part of his plans to create a low-impact, self-sustaining plot, **Benjamin Crosby** starts his no-dig regime.

GOURMET MUSHROOMS

Richard Mansfield-Clark gives expert advice on how to create your own crop of rustic mushrooms in your back garden.

THE SECRET LIFE OF POLLINATORS

Claire Waring gets up close and personal with alternative pollinators to understand their habits and preferences, and she helps us to create a more suited environment too.

MAKING YOUR OWN BEADS

Crafters: Indulge your 'bead-a-holic' habit with these ideas for making your own.

SIMPLE HOME BREWING

Reader and keen home-brewer **Susan Williams** shares her five favourite home brew recipes.

VINTAGE MARMALADES

Just in time to make use of seasonal Seville oranges, Home Farmer food historian **Seren Evans-Charrington** delves into her old cookery books to summon up some unusual flavours.

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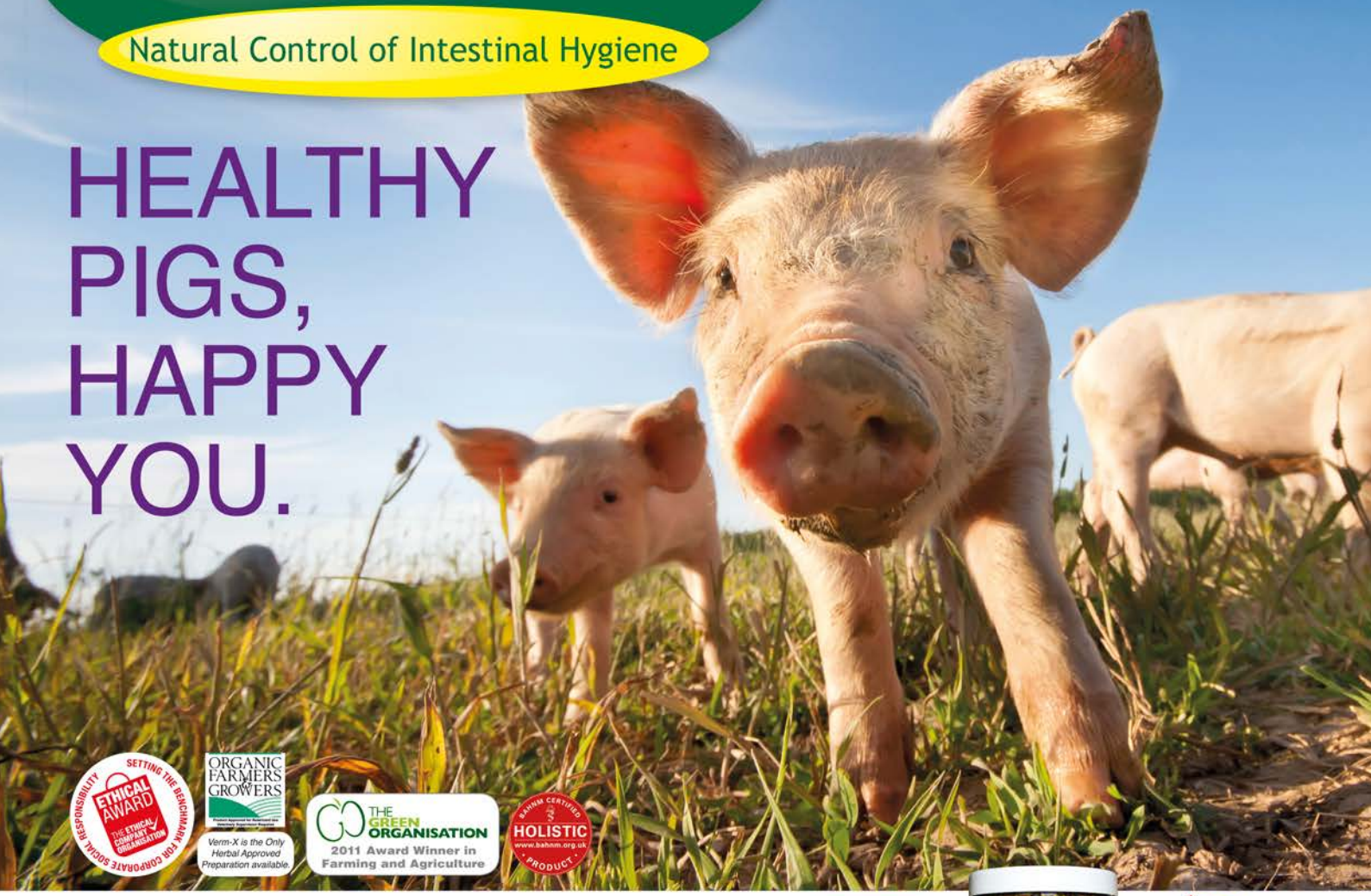
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